

This is a holy war – but what a horrible thing war is.

Luigi Gasparotto, 28 October 1918

In the aftermath of Caporetto things did not look good for Italy. The army had lost hundreds of thousands of men and vast amounts of weaponry and equipment, all of which would have to be replaced if the country was to keep its war going. Wild stories of moral collapse abounded, encouraging dark speculations about social disintegration and even revolution. Recovery was the first priority. Many things contributed to the revival of Italian arms during the first six months of 1918, among them Allied military and economic assistance, the effects of a long war of attrition which was now wearing down Austria–Hungary faster than Italy, and Germany’s preoccupation with winning the war on the western front. All this gave Italy time, which she used to good effect. For twenty-nine months the war had been run by a Piedmontese general in the Piedmontese way. What now happened was revolution in military affairs, invisible to outsiders. For decades southern generals had had the reputation of being political soldiers first and foremost. Now the war was handed over to one of them. Diaz proved to be just the man the country needed. Under his guiding hand the Italian army was rebuilt on new foundations, strategy was forged to fit it, and policy shaped and timed by military practicalities.

Diaz’s unwillingness to dance to the tune of his French and British allies and launch what he regarded as an unnecessarily risky and premature offensive did not go down well in London and Paris. He had good reasons for caution, being more aware than they were of his army’s limitations. Ready at last, the Italian army began the climactic battle of Vittorio Veneto on 24 October 1918 – a battle which the Allies thought at the time and historians have since believed was a last-minute attempt to cash in on a war that was already over. In fact, planning for the battle began several months before it happened and when it did the Italian army inflicted a decisive defeat in the field on its opponent, something its British and French partners were unable to do in the West.

A new commander

After Caporetto, there was little or no chance that Cadorna could survive (though there is some evidence that the new premier, Vittorio Orlando, may have wanted to exonerate him). On 28 October, the day that he took the oath of office, Orlando by his own account secured the king's agreement that a replacement be secretly prepared. Shortly afterwards the cabinet decided to send the new war minister, General Vittorio Alfieri, to the war zone to discuss the reorganisation of the high command with the king. At Peschiera on 4 November the king was presented with the proposal that the duke of Aosta, whose conduct of 3rd Army during its retreat had been the one bright spot on an otherwise dark canvas, become the new chief of the general staff and that Generals Armando Diaz and Gaetano Giardino be joint sub-chiefs. Vittorio Emanuele had no desire to see a potential heir to the throne take up a post which might eclipse his own, and preferred Diaz. At this Bissolati, wanting a counter balance to Giardino for whom he did not much care, proposed his fellow Freemason General Pietro Badoglio. The suggestion went down well with the king who, though usually cool and reserved, showed unusual warmth towards Badoglio when they met by chance.¹ The substitution was done behind Alfieri's back – somewhat to Diaz's surprise.² Thus when at Rapallo on 5 and 6 November Lloyd George and Foch made Allied reinforcements conditional on a new *Comando supremo*, the die was already cast. The problem of what to do with Cadorna was solved by one of the British officials, Lieutenant-Colonel Maurice Hankey, who suggested making him the Italian representative on the newly created Supreme War Council.

The new field commander of the Italian armies was different in every way from his predecessor. A Neapolitan, and therefore not a member of the conservative Piedmontese military caste that had dominated the Italian army throughout most of its existence, a gunner by training, and only 55 years old, Diaz had amassed both an impressive amount and a wide variety of experience. Before the world war he had seen action in the Libyan war of 1911–12 (like Capello but unlike Cadorna) and had done several stints at general staff headquarters, serving as the head of Pollio's secretariat in the year before the war, as well as acting as *relatore* (presenter/reporter) of the military budget in parliament. Recalled from a brigade command in October 1914 to serve as head of the operations section, he had then commanded first a division and subsequently a corps on the Carso between June 1916 and November 1917. The one blot on an otherwise glittering record occurred in 1900 when, while on manoeuvre, he had moved his troops through a valley and not along

the crests as current doctrine prescribed, earning him a telling-off from General Caviglia – whose superior he now was! Personally calm, modest, firm in judgement but relaxed in manner, Diaz was an instinctive communicator. He was also a man who made an immediate impression. Before his appointment he had met the king only three times, first in 1913 when he was decorated for his actions in the Libyan war, and then on the Carso in June 1917 (when, in the middle of fighting off an Austrian counter-attack, he had kept the king waiting twenty minutes) and again in July. After the latter meeting, the king reportedly remarked to his aide-de-camp ‘One day this general will be useful.’³

When Diaz took up command, his tasks were self-evident: to arrest the invasion and resist on the Piave, to reconstruct the army, and to improve the strategic co-ordination of the war by the soldiers and the politicians. However, for a moment all the cards were up in the air. On 3 November the cabinet heard from Bissolati that the army might possibly not be able to hold on the Piave and might have to retreat yet further to the Mincio. Some observers doubted whether the army that was arriving on the Piave had the physical or moral strength to stand there: the colonial minister, Gaspare Colosimo, heard from one source that unless fresh British and French divisions arrived to reinforce the Piave front ‘only a miracle can save what remains of the Italian army’.⁴ On 9 November – the day after Diaz took up his new post – Orlando brought back the news that the Allies had agreed to help Italy provided that she resisted to the death on the Piave to give them time to do so. General Dallolio, back from inspecting the new front, was deeply pessimistic. Conditions there were ‘very grave, almost catastrophic – No matériel, morale lacking, officers without confidence, the army in pieces.’ The Piave could not be held, and with the army in dissolution a catastrophe could occur. Aroused by Dallolio’s defeatism, Sonnino lectured his fellow ministers: ‘The Allies will help us if we stand on the Piave. We must be calm, confident, courageous – anything else is a betrayal.’⁵ Afterwards Orlando claimed – falsely – that he had closed this session with a declaration that every inch of Italian soil would be defended to the last. As yet, the government had no such declaratory policy.⁶

On 11 November, with a number of his generals still in favour of retreating to the Mincio–Adige line, Diaz confirmed the halt on the Piave but prudently ordered the preparation of a provisional line from Vicenza to Fusine and a last-ditch defensive line on the Mincio–Adige. An Austrian telegram enquiring whether Venice was to be declared an ‘open city’ pushed everyone to a decision. As Alfieri pointed out, the defence of Venice was inseparably bound up with the issue of whether or not to stand on the Piave. Four days later the brand new War Council met for



Fig. 12 King Victor Emanuel III and General Diaz

the first time to decide the matter. The king, the premier, Generals Alfieri and Giardino and Admiral Thaon di Revel, the chief of naval staff, heard what Orlando described afterwards as a 'luminous' exposition from Diaz explaining why retreating to the Mincio was not an option. The new government had handed the responsibility for the decision to the new field commander, and he now made it. As Venice was an important naval base, di Revel was much relieved.

When the news of the unfolding disaster at Caporetto reached the Allies on 26 October aid was soon on its way thanks to the transport arrangements made earlier in the year, but it was not without strings. A French offer of four divisions and forty-four batteries of artillery on 27 October was followed next day by the offer of two British divisions. However, Cadorna's proposal to put the French troops straight into line on the Piave met with a blunt refusal from Foch and his British opposite number, General Sir William Robertson, when they arrived in Italy on 30 and 31 October. The Italian armies, on whom the responsibility for defending Italy rested, must stand firm on the Piave; their forces were only 'a contribution' to that defence.⁷ This decision reflected both generals' lack of confidence in Cadorna: when Foch arrived in Rome for talks with the soon-to-be-discarded field commander, he made it plain

that he had no confidence in the way the army was being run by the current high command.⁸ When the first French divisions arrived at the beginning of November they were deployed between Verona and Brescia, safe from immediate harm in the event of another collapse. The decisions to make a stand on the Piave and to replace Cadorna were necessary not just in themselves but also to bolster Allied confidence. At a meeting between the three heads of government and the king at Peschiera on 8 November, the Allies agreed to increase their contribution to six French and six British divisions (though one of the latter was kept in France as a consequence of the battle of Cambrai). The transport arrangements worked without a hitch, and between 30 October and 8 December 1,413 trains carried 266,000 men, 63,000 horses, more than 1,000 guns and 24,000 vehicles into Italy.⁹

The presence of Allied troops on Italian soil was a mixed blessing and after initial enthusiasm their absence from the front line, their apparent ambitions to control and command Italian divisions, the better treatment their officers and men enjoyed, and their scarcely concealed lack of esteem for the Italian army soon began to arouse resentment.¹⁰ French soldiers were initially shocked by the power of the Catholic Church, and its priests in turn described the French soldiers as 'degenerates' who were not to be fraternised with. The number of shirkers ensconced behind the lines, the circumstances in which Italian soldiers had to live, and the vast gulf between the officers and their men all made a negative impact. Official French regulations were designed to prevent fraternisation with Italian soldiers, who set a bad example with their habit of passing time in cafes at all hours of the day and night and going on leave without permission, and with civilians for fear of pacifist contagion. Individually, though, soldiers found their way around these obstacles – as soldiers will.¹¹ Foreign observers too were inclined to see the ways of the Italian army as sloppy, or worse. 'The officers here are a nasty illbred arrogant set,' the novelist John Dos Passos, working in an ambulance unit, noted in his diary after watching a Sardinian officer kicking a sergeant waiter.¹²

Diaz styled himself 'Military Representative of the Government', a sign that the politicians were no longer going to be held at a respectful distance from both military action and military decision-making. Where Cadorna's headquarters had had a distinctly Catholic tone, his was masonic – which meant, in practical terms, collaborative but also sceptically anti-clerical.¹³ One of his first priorities was to do away with what one of his biographers termed 'certain injurious ganglia' that had been formed in the nerve centre of the army, where the ambitious, the passed-over and the self-proclaimed unrecognised geniuses had colonised competing offices and jostled with one another.¹⁴ The most

pernicious element of what was unflatteringly termed the *Comandissimo* was Cadorna's secretariat, which had acted as a cut-out between him and everyone else. The new chief eliminated the *Comandissimo*, simplifying and reducing the number of offices, decentralising responsibility and establishing clear vertical lines of authority. The co-ordinating role, which Porro had conspicuously failed to fulfil, was shared between the new sub-chiefs: Badoglio took responsibility for reorganising the army, Giardino for strategic planning.¹⁵

Where Cadorna had held some reins only loosely, Diaz held them more tightly; where Cadorna had held them tightly, Diaz loosened them. Only headquarters could now suspend leave, and local military actions were no longer permitted unless and until the *Comando supremo* had inspected the situation and was satisfied of their usefulness. Cadorna's practice of using bullying telephone calls – known as 'torpedoes' – to threaten his subordinates to the point of tears was disdained, and instead army commanders found themselves engaged in dialogue with his successor.¹⁶ Liaison officers were sent out to take the pulse of the army. Cadorna's most feared weapon of command was publicly and uncomplacably discarded. In a circular sent out on 20 November 1917, Diaz announced that he did not intend to take severe measures against 'anyone who makes a mistake as a result of inexperience or of a praiseworthy initiative that does not meet with success'. Sacking officers, especially those with a good record, would be an absolutely last resort and would only happen 'after having put into practice all the means that a superior [officer] has to correct a junior'.¹⁷

The issues that were of the most fundamental concern to Diaz were the strength and the underlying consistency of his army. The statistics that were gathered – never wholly consistent with one another – indicated that of the 1,001,400 men of the 1st and 2nd Armies and the *Zona Carnia* who had taken part in the fighting on 24 October, 25,000 had died, 250,000 had been taken prisoner and 300,000 taken to flight when their units dissolved. In one way, the situation was not as bad as it looked. Overall, between 20 and 24 October the Italian army had lost 1,200,000 (including deserters, sick and wounded) but could expect to count on 1,800,000 men, a figure that included 50,000 sick and wounded and 170,000 fresh reserves. The latter were mostly made up of men of the class of 1899, sent into line in November 1917 and now being formed into separate regiments instead of being inserted into existing units to avoid their coming into contact with 'tired' troops.¹⁸

Cadorna had scandalously accused his army of cowardice, believing its moral fibre had been rotted by pacifist propaganda (though three months later he changed his tune), and more than one of the army's

senior generals still felt the same: asked by the Caporetto Inquiry whether defeatist propaganda had played a part in the debacle, General Morrone thought that 'you could not deny that it had exercised an influence where dense masses of men were concerned'.¹⁹ The underlying morale of the army had undoubtedly taken a knock – but it was bruised, not irredeemably broken. None of the army commanders had reported any evident reasons for alarm on the eve of Caporetto, and neither had the commanders of IV, XXVII, XXIV and II Corps when they were visited by liaison officers five days before the battle.²⁰ An enquiry conducted in the two months immediately afterwards confirmed their judgements. After rising between May and August 1917, the number of crimes reported had fallen markedly in September. In the case of some crimes – desertion to the enemy and the abandonment of a post – there had been no recrudescence of the levels reached in 1916, and in the case of crimes of indiscipline, insubordination and the refusal to obey orders the number had gone down proportionately to the increase in the size of the army. *Carabinieri* reports bore this out. Although giving a nod to the role of increased socialist pacifist propaganda, the report laid considerable stress on the effects of tiredness, discouragement at the lack of evident military success, and complaints about suspensions of leave, particularly the *licenze agricole* that allowed peasants home to help bring in the harvest. The lack of appropriate propaganda and the inability of inexperienced junior officers to inculcate a spirit of duty into their men were important indirect causes of the collapse.²¹

Despite the upbeat talk there were signs that the army was still very fragile. On 16 November an entire brigade surrendered almost without fighting; on the *altopiano* 25,000 men, mostly from units previously tested under fire, surrendered on 4–5 December; and in mid December three companies of infantry on Monte Grappa went over to the enemy. Sporadic protests by groups of *Alpini* and *Bersaglieri* against being sent back into line were an ongoing phenomenon. Faced at the start of the New Year with signs of war weariness and a desire for peace, Orlando feared that the army might take to heart talk of Caporetto as a military strike or a politico-military revolt and do what it had not thought of doing on 24 October. That meant not only that its military value was doubtful but also that its usefulness as an instrument for maintaining civil order was questionable – this at a moment when Naples was apparently 'on the eve of an uprising' and when the *Carabinieri* were reporting that only two of the twelve provinces of central Italy (Rome and Pisa) were in a normal condition.²² Tasked at the end of January with assessing the state of army morale via soldiers on winter leave, the prefects reported that it was generally good, though Turin and Florence were notable

exceptions. The reorganisation of trench tours and improvements in leave were having a positive effect, but everywhere there was evidence of weariness with the war and discontent, some of it directed at the tolerance of shirkers and some at officers who appeared to have little interest in their men. Ubaldo Commandini, general commissioner for civil aid and domestic propaganda, reported much the same thing in early May.²³

As the army settled down in its new lines along the Piave it seemed both to officials and to at least one well-placed outside observer that there was no need for great concern about its morale. An analysis of soldiers' correspondence carried out by a special section of the intelligence service in early December found an almost unanimous determination to resist the invasion and throw the enemy off Italian soil. The troops were animated by a new sense of purpose and only 10 per cent showed signs of tiredness, due more to physical discomforts than to moral fragility.²⁴ As the New Year opened Brigadier-General Delmé-Radcliffe, head of the British military mission and a friend of the king, saw some encouraging signs: 'there is very little talk about retiring now & not much thinking about it either. The Italian army is hardening & improving by the day.' Some of this he put down to 'hints from us' about front-line strengths, the proper use of artillery and machine-guns, and the establishment of training schools for all arms. Morale in the country at large was improving too, and there was now 'more sign of the offensive spirit'.²⁵ General Plumer, commander-in-chief of British forces, was a little more cautious. After three months' work the Italian army, though capable of making 'a brilliant attack or a stubborn defence' was still incapable of any but the simplest manoeuvres and 'uncertain if called upon for any sustained or prolonged effort either in attack or defence ...'.²⁶ His opposite number, General Fayolle, in an otherwise critical and sometimes caustic survey of Italian military capabilities, remarked that the 'raw material' – the human element – was 'not bad and will be able to give good results if properly used'.²⁷

The existence of defeatist propaganda behind the front line was a matter of concern as work began to put the disbanded armies back together. Towards the end of November the task of forming 5th Army out of the remnants of his former 2nd Army was given to Luigi Capello, still on active service but shortly to be suspended when the Caporetto Inquiry began in January. The prefect of Mantua pointed out that almost all the population in the provinces west of the Po that had been selected for the reorganisation of the 5th Army subscribed to the official socialist party. A worried Orlando thought that it might be wise to re-examine the proposal. Diaz calmed him down: strategic necessity dictated the

choice, but the premier could count on the 'appropriate necessary disciplinary measures' that were in place and which 'for other obvious reasons too' must be severe.²⁸ Soon, though, Diaz found his difficulties multiplying. There was not enough clothing and equipment for the 5th Army or the troops in 'concentration' camps, which began to affect morale and discipline as well as military readiness. The local population was another worrying factor. Leaflets deploring the government's failure to take up the Pope's peace proposal were circulating in Bassano, and the agricultural populations of Verona, Mantua and Padua were demonstrating against the Allied troops that were arriving there. If these provinces were not put in a state of war, and therefore subject to full military control, the *Comando supremo* would be 'disarmed against any subversive action and especially the possible renewal of anti-war propaganda'.²⁹ The necessary decree, signed by the king, was already on Alfieri's desk, to be signed by Orlando when he returned from Versailles.

Orlando's concerns were not quietened for long. Alarmed by news from some of his prefects that discipline among the 'disbanded' troops of 2nd Army left a lot to be desired, he suggested that the camps be broken up into smaller units and spread more widely around the country to places outside the war zone where subversive elements were not preponderant, making surveillance easier. Badoglio, who was overseeing the reconstruction process, reported that propaganda was not active and that the troops, as well as being closely supervised, were extremely heavily occupied. There had been no 'disbanded' elements of 2nd Army for the last twenty days; the camp commandants were reporting that everything was in order; and in the camps there was 'a notable combative spirit' and a sense of the effort necessary to hasten the resolution of the war. Diaz reassured the premier that thanks to good management, support by the *Carabinieri* and regular inspection, discipline in the four 'concentration camps', which had initially left something to be desired, was now substantially improved and numbers falling: of the 200,000 men initially housed at the infantry camp at Castelfranco only 65,000 now remained. As for desertions, about which the premier had also complained, 'the number would certainly diminish if there were an active propaganda effort in the interior of the country to set against the pacifist and anti-militarist ideas with which the deserters are for the most part imbued, ideas which they try to spread among their companions when they reach the camps'.³⁰ Anti-war demonstrations and propaganda in the war zone continued to cause the high command concern, and on Christmas Eve Diaz ordered his army commanders to set up a special intelligence service to give him accurate and up-to-the-minute information about the influence that 'elements of disorder and propaganda

hostile to the war' were having on the population in the theatre of operations and the troops located there.³¹

***Servizio P* and the regeneration of morale**

Diaz's anxiety about the state of his army's morale was triggered in part by an Austrian propaganda campaign targeting the Italians which began in late October 1917 when the retreating troops were showered with manifestos encouraging them to give up the war. Over the winter the campaign intensified as leaflets, newspapers and letters from prisoners of war were reinforced with megaphone exhortations and 'bottle-post' messages sent down the rivers. It increased yet further in the spring, as the Austrians prepared for their forthcoming June offensive. On the Piave, 110,000 leaflets were launched into Italian lines in March 1918 and 150,000 in April. Fraternalisation was encouraged: Austrian cigarettes were a popular barter for Italian bread and oranges, and on at least one sector of the front there were regular Austrian visits and hour-long 'coffee breaks'.³² As the campaign gathered momentum, its themes changed. At first Austrian leaflets spoke in general and rather impersonal terms of British imperialism and Austro-German military superiority, but as time went on they became more 'bolshevik' in tone. Italian soldiers were encouraged to disobey their officers and join their erstwhile enemies as brothers in a common rebellion against the people who had brought them to the slaughterhouse. There were worrying signs that the enemy's exhortations were making an impact on the troops.³³ Evidently alarmed, on 9 March 1918 the *Comando supremo* announced that anyone trafficking with the enemy would be shot – a warning it felt it necessary to repeat eleven days later.

The idea that the discipline of persuasion could be a complement, and not an alternative, to the discipline of coercion had been developed by Capello during the six months before Caporetto. Taking a leaf from his book, Diaz proposed early in January to distribute 'the good press' among the better instructed elements in order to combat defeatist propaganda within the army. The war minister enthusiastically backed the idea and suggested in addition publishing a bulletin that would explain in easily understood terms the meaning and significance of current international events.³⁴ At more or less the same time, General Giardino proposed establishing a propaganda service to gather information on troop morale in each of the individual armies. Shortly this would become *Servizio P*, one of the most important instruments in Diaz's armoury of command and control. The next step was to introduce designated specialist officers into every army to take charge

of propaganda. Trusted soldiers (*fiduciari*) would mix with the troops to monitor their feelings and put in a positive word where necessary. 'Simple and persuasive' gatherings for officers, non-commissioned officers and especially the ordinary soldiers would put across the purposes of the fighting and the message that only the defeat of the enemy would hasten peace. The needs of the troops were to be identified via censorship and the questioning of individuals and reported up the chain of command. A soldiers' newspaper would speak to the troops' personal interests, and when they went out of line cinemas and sports competitions would be laid on to entertain and distract them.³⁵

The innovation was a response to both positive and negative stimuli: while on the one hand it was an important component of the reformist agenda of the Diaz regime, on the other it was also a tool with which to stem desertion rates that were a concern to the high command and a worry to Orlando. It was also a recognition of the changing face of war as exemplified in the growing volume of American and Allied propaganda and the reverberations of the Russian Revolution. The job specification was simple: *vigilanza, propaganda ed assistenza* ('vigilance, propaganda and help'). Translated into practicalities, this meant evaluating morale and countering subversive influences, propagating 'defensive' propaganda which explained why Italy was fighting using lectures, films and newspapers, and providing places behind the lines where soldiers could rest, write letters and generally recover their mental strength in civilised surroundings. The strategy was a shrewd one, if perhaps somewhat belated in its genesis and application, and also a successful one thanks in no small measure to the enemy. Until July 1918, Austria-Hungary concentrated on 'offensive' propaganda, apparently to no great effect. As Brigadier-General Delmé-Radcliffe remarked, simply distributing leaflets as the Austrians were doing did not appear to be very effective. What did work, to a limited degree, was fraternisation but rigorous methods were used to counter it.³⁶

The new service was run by the intelligence section of each individual army and both content and means were left largely to them, though general guidance was given out from time to time. Thus the *Comando supremo* suggested various means to get the government's message across including using former prisoners of war who could recount 'the sufferings experienced in prison' and soldiers' masses 'in which patriotic sentiment can, with appropriate moderation, be grafted onto religious sentiments'.³⁷ Ordinary newspapers now circulated much more freely, carrying propaganda materials thanks to government encouragement and inducement (the government bought thousands of copies in return). A circular sent out by 2nd Army to its propaganda officers listed fifty

topics for conversations with the troops; they included ‘Engineers and factory workers aren’t shirkers’, and ‘A premature peace means factories closed, an invasion of German capital and workers, unemployment and hunger for us.’³⁸ These and other themes were repeated and expanded in the trench newspapers in terms that ranged from the sophisticated – German-owned factories and banks had taken the fruit of the workers’ labours and their own money was now paying for the guns that were killing them – to the simplistic. Thus *Savoia!* urged its readers on 27 June 1918 to ‘Kill the damned race . . . that wants to have your women, steal your crops and livestock . . . throw the thieves into the street, kill the filthy violator of Italian women.’³⁹

Trench newspapers, previously local in origin and with a simple thematic content, became important vehicles to propagandise an army half of which was semi-literate, and by June some fifty were circulating among the troops. Intellectuals signed on with enthusiasm, eager to take part in a process which, according to the leading historian of the genre, allowed them to ‘restore [their] privileges, collaborate in the construction of a new bourgeois party and [take part in] its struggle for internal hegemony’.⁴⁰ A variety of themes were developed to appeal to different instincts and predilections. Much was made of the idea that in defending the *patria* a soldier was defending his home (*casa*), his women and his property, and that betraying it by surrendering was betraying the *Mamma*. A more elevated appeal explained that Rome, as the wellspring of European civilisation, was fighting not for conquest or dominion but to complete her work and to defend the idea of right. Appeals were made to religious feeling, too, with the explanation that fighting (and dying) for justice was doing the work of God, although this sometimes took a decidedly secular turn. The 138th Fusilier Regiment had its own Ten Commandments: the second instructed soldiers in the trenches to be ‘as cunning as a wolf’, and the eighth only to fire at a sitting target. The papers varied in popularity according to the degree to which they were official in tone and central in origin. Some, according to one contemporary, were used as toilet paper.⁴¹

By the time that the war ended, some 1,500 officers were actively engaged in the multiple roles of assistance, vigilance and propaganda. They were usually men with wartime commissions, carefully selected for their intelligence, practical capacities and records of valour and standing with the troops. Their presence represented something of a revolution for an army that had traditionally taken for granted the natural capacity of all officers to act as educators of their men, and to some eyes the *Servizio P* personnel looked uncomfortably like Russian commissars. In August 1918 Zupelli fired off a missive to Orlando complaining about

the uncontrolled activities of the mutilated officers who were participating in the propaganda offensive, and made it clear that he wanted no civilians involved in it but only officers, who would avoid 'any danger of discussion'.⁴²

A new regime

If the army's morale was to improve, then it also had to be better led. It was not enough, Diaz told his army commanders, simply to harp on about the *grandezza* of the ideals for which the soldiers were fighting: they had to be 'personally convinced that we are caring for them, that their well-being, their needs, their sacrifices are recognised'. There were still too many abuses and too much favouritism. Soldiers were getting only half their due or less: drinks were being adulterated, tobacco rations were often minimal or non-existent, and attempts to improve things were being hampered by 'the egoism of a few privileged [people]'. All of this was going on right under the noses of the troops, creating resentment or worse, and it all had to change. Army, corps and divisional commanders were now to carry out frequent inspections, and so were their subordinates, and anyone committing or tolerating the slightest injustice was to be punished 'inexorably'.⁴³ Middle-ranking and junior officers also had to play their part. That meant reversing past practice. Cadorna had warned officers about the 'tendency to familiarity with the troops' which was often 'a sign of weakness and an unhealthy desire for popularity'.⁴⁴ Faced with ongoing evidence of war-weariness and a widespread desire for peace, Diaz complained that there was insufficient 'moral contact' between officers and men. It was 'absolutely necessary' that all officers, and not just junior ones, live the same life as the soldiers and share their hardships 'with serenity and in good spirits'.⁴⁵

Problems of low morale persisted during the spring, exacerbated by talk on the home front of the need for peace at all costs which particularly affected soldiers returning from leave in Piedmont. Censors' reports suggested that behind the lines discouragement and tiredness were growing thanks to failures in local administration, commercial speculation and requisitioning.⁴⁶ Plain-clothes *Carabinieri* watched in restaurants and cafes for any signs of anti-war propaganda, and the courts cracked down hard on this as on other transgressions: in May, writing down a defeatist song in a letter earned an artilleryman two months in prison, and singing one landed a corporal with six years in prison and a 200-lire fine.⁴⁷ Symptoms of tiredness and low morale lingered in some units into April, due to poor rations, heavy labouring work when out of line, and in the case of the Brescia zone because troops

who had not been out of line for two and a half years were being reinforced by elements of the 2nd Army whom they did not trust after Caporetto. There was, the head of military intelligence pointed out, 'a certain analogy between the situation in this zone and that which existed in the Caporetto sector last year.'⁴⁸

For some months the military authorities and the *Comando supremo* were, as Diaz acknowledged, 'in the dark' as to what the true state of morale among the troops actually was: troops on leave were apparently saying that the army was very tired of the war and ready to surrender or flee, but when interrogated they claimed to have said exactly the opposite because they were afraid of being judged impressionable, or cowardly, or defeatist.⁴⁹ The generals put out a much more positive message. After conferring with army commanders and the general staff, Nitti told a journalist friend that the troops' morale was 'really good, better than it has been for a year and perhaps since the start of the war.'⁵⁰ Diaz was more circumspect. At a meeting of the top civil and military leadership on 9 March 1918, he told Orlando that the morale of the troops was 'fair but not very offensive [-minded]'.⁵¹ The German offensive in the west that began twelve days later sent a shiver down the collective spine lest the Allied troops leave Italy, but those anxieties proved unfounded. Diaz's doubts about the army were finally overcome when the head of military intelligence, Colonel Marchetti, reassured him on 12 April that morale was good, though a month later Orlando was still worried about desertion rates which he thought were as bad as in Cadorna's day and possibly worse.

Diaz handled the delicate situation he had inherited with a combination of carrots and sticks. Rations were improved, so that the average calorific intake rose from 3,067 in November 1917 to 3,508 in June 1918, and military co-operatives sold food, drinks and other necessities cheaply. Troops now got an extra ten days' leave on top of the fifteen days already their due, and there were more exonerations for agricultural workers. Pay stayed the same, but a state-funded scheme provided free life insurance policies worth 500 lire for the rank and file and 1,000 lire for officers. On 1 November 1917 the government set up a new Ministry for Military Assistance and War Pensions, a sign of its intention to take greater care of fighting men and their families.⁵² Remarking on the 'notable disproportion' between the awards for valour given to officers and to the other ranks, who made up 97 per cent of the army, the high command ordered that they be made more equal.

At the same time, stiff discipline was maintained. In the aftermath of the Monte Grappa incident in December, Diaz ordered commanders to use 'extreme rigour' where necessary. In January, military courts

were instructed to use Article 92 of the military penal code which mandated execution by shooting in the chest, deemed slightly less demeaning than being shot in the back, where soldiers voluntarily abandoned their rifles or ammunition. The distinction between defeatism and betrayal was clearly defined in order to ensure that the harshest sanctions were applied, and the interrogation reports of returned prisoners of war were closely scrutinised to identify those who could not completely justify their capture. On 12 May the *Comando supremo* made known its displeasure at the weakness of the sentences being handed down and ordered that 'weak judges' be replaced; and eight days later, faced with the enemy's mounting propaganda offensive, it made any act of familiarity with the enemy punishable by death.⁵³ All this is very redolent of Cadorna's methods, but there were several important differences. Decimation disappeared, summary executions all but vanished, and the authorities were now more concerned to find out the causes of military crimes. However, the firing squads still did their miserable work. Under Cadorna's regime soldiers were shot at a rate of seventeen a month – under his successor that rate rose to more than nineteen a month.⁵⁴

Fending off the Austrians and the Allies

As what would turn out to be the last year of Italy's war began, Diaz's thirty-three infantry and four cavalry divisions faced fifty-three Austrian and German divisions along a line running from Stelvio via Lake Garda, the Brenta river, Monte Grappa, Montello and Ponte di Priula to the sea. Counterbalancing this numerical inferiority, the Italian line had been reduced in length from 650 to 300 kilometres, and with the plains behind them the Italian troops had good road communications along which to bring up support. The Austro-German forces were at the very end of their long supply lines and in the mountains could only use mule tracks and footpaths to bring forward weapons, ammunition and food. For two months they lived off captured Italian stocks. After that their rations grew increasingly meagre.

A crucial two-phase battle took place between 10–26 November and 4–25 December as Conrad launched attacks on the Asiago plateau, against Monte Grappa and on the Piave. The attacks on the *altipiani* were finally stopped on Christmas Eve at the very edge of the uplands. Monte Grappa was a naturally good defensive position, but conditions were appalling as Italians fought to hold improvised positions in freezing winds and dry snow with temperatures falling to 15 degrees below zero. Resistance was tough and determined, some units fighting to the last man. Austrian detachments got across the Piave on a 3-kilometre front

on the first day but could get no further, partly due to the fact that the river was under the guns of Italian artillery on Monte Grappa. Between 20 and 24 November the Austrians had a second try at breaking the Italian front, launching sixty battalions on a 24-kilometre front, this time without the support of artillery. Swift Italian counter-attacks and the abandonment of uselessly exposed positions brought it to a halt. Taking German advice, the Austrian high command ordered the suspension of the offensive. Conrad continued smaller-scale actions for the next three weeks, achieving a local success against Melette on 4 December where the Italians committed their old errors – too many troops held in the front line and insufficient depth in their defences – and lost 22,000 men, more than half of whom were taken prisoner. Four British and French divisions came into line that day, reinforcing a defence that was already holding firm. After further unsuccessful attacks on the lower Piave between 9 and 18 December, the Austrians abandoned their bridgehead at Zenson on 27 December and withdrew to the left bank. Surprised and impressed by the Italians' fighting power, Conrad confessed to his wife on 3 January 1918 'We can no longer count on victory in Italy.'⁵⁵

The first major action by the Italian army in the New Year took place at Tre Monti on 28–31 January 1918. Italian artillery began the battle with counter-battery fire, followed by a brief passage of destructive fire to open gaps in the wire and then interdiction fire to protect the infantry once they had breached the enemy lines. The field guns used French munitions with contact fuses that were more effective than the Italian version. Sardinian infantry, *Bersaglieri*, *Alpini* and *Arditi* assault sections attacked in flexible formations and attack columns were ordered to adapt their movement to the lie of the land and not to be excessively preoccupied with keeping laterally in line. Miraculously, the first attackers were not hit by enemy fire even though the attack was launched at 0930 on a clear January day with perfect visibility. The idea was to employ infiltration tactics, leaving specially designated sections to mop up strong points, though in fact what took place was more a conventional direct assault on the strongpoints. The *Arditi* abandoned the line as soon as they had taken their positions, and after three of the four designated strongpoints had been captured the action was halted with losses totalling 5,000. Although by no means an unvarnished success, the battle marked notable progress in the use of artillery.⁵⁶

The question of Italy's military strategy for the coming year was high on Diaz's agenda. The Allied Supreme War Council, to which Cadorna had been shunted after Caporetto, produced a first Note on 13 December 1917 proposing a defensive strategy along the entire front from the North

Sea to the Adriatic in 1918. A further Note on 24 December concluded that for the time being it was neither possible nor desirable to take the offensive in Italy. Italy's role in the strategic discussions at Versailles was affected by the fact that Orlando and Diaz held Cadorna at arm's length, while the French viewed the Italians as lightweight one-time allies of Germany who were quick to ask for aid but slow to pull their weight.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Diaz needed to know what the British and French intended for the year ahead. His divisions would be ready to take the offensive come the spring, but men and matériel would have to be moved to the appropriate locations. If the Allies were waiting for the Americans to arrive, then Italy should continue concentrating on defensive works and wait too, undertaking only such limited offensive actions as would improve her position. If he could not rely on the continued presence of the eleven British and French divisions currently in Italy, this would limit or even exclude any offensive action. In those circumstances, action would have to be taken as quickly as possible to readjust and realign Italian forces.⁵⁸

The Allied military representatives at Versailles were indeed minded, as Pétain had put it, to *attendre les chars et les américains* ('wait for the tanks and the Americans'), and proposed waiting until 1919 before undertaking a decisive offensive – a conclusion from which Marshal Foch forcefully dissented. At the Supreme War Council meeting held between 30 January and 2 February 1918 and attended by Orlando, Sonnino and General Alfieri (who found Cadorna's presence at the table among the Italian delegation very disagreeable), it was agreed broadly to wait for a year before launching a major Allied offensive and the respective general staffs were tasked with preparing appropriate plans in detail and forwarding them to Versailles. The proposal to create a general Allied reserve carried alarming implications, as it raised the possibility that some or all of the British and French troops that Diaz wanted to keep might be withdrawn from his front.⁵⁹

In circumstances of some uncertainty, the *Comando supremo* began working up its strategic plans for the year. If the general reserve, which would entail the withdrawal of four French, three British and seven Italian divisions, were not insisted on then it would be possible to carry out a large-scale operation from Lake Garda to the river Brenta, along with minor operations at Monte Grappa, Stelvio and elsewhere to distract the enemy's attention. The main offensive, using four French, four British and four Italian divisions in the first line, six Italian divisions in the second line and other British, French and Italian divisions in the third line, would take place on the Asiago plateau. The objective would be to recover as much ground as possible up to the Val Sugana and

towards Rovereto and thereby secure the Italian front against the threat of invasion – ‘which must always exist so long as the enemy were close to the exits into the plain,’ Badoglio told Delmé-Radcliffe. If the general reserve had to be kept back, then a limited offensive on the Asiago plateau using two British, two French and five Italian divisions would seek to recover the eastern half of the plateau. New roads were being constructed, troops moved and stores and munitions brought up. Everything, including a stock of 928 new medium and heavy guns, would be ready by 1 May.⁶⁰

Working up the army

Spring 1918 was a time of intense activity for Badoglio and the army commanders as they worked to reorganise the army, reform its tactics and revise its operational practices. Infantry regiments, now smaller than at the start of the war (2,672 men as against 3,586 previously) and therefore more flexible, were equipped with a flame-thrower section and now had thirty-six instead of thirty machine-guns. Badoglio reorganised the artillery, creating homogeneous groups of batteries of the most modern and powerful types, and army commanders were ordered to give more attention to positioning their guns so that if or when it came to a defensive battle they had nothing more to do than fit them into pre-assigned places.⁶¹ Successive defensive lines were organised on the plain between Astico and the Piave to allow a prolonged defence in depth in case the enemy broke through the front again, troops familiarised with the positions they would occupy, and reserves were stationed in strongpoints on the second line.⁶² To keep the offensive spirit alive, and to take prisoners as sources of valuable intelligence, Diaz ordered commanders to carry out small local attacks. Rewards of 100 lire per prisoner and ten days’ leave per soldier were offered to every patrol capturing enemy personnel to incentivise the troops. Mistakes were still being made – too many commanders relied only on surprise and neglected preparation – but the army was beginning to learn.⁶³

The Italian armies were now being handled in new, more flexible ways. Divisions would no longer be broken up and brigades treated as separate entities, a process which had fragmented the army and weakened morale, and corps were given the authority to cede divisions temporarily to one another in case of need. Addressing practices which had contributed to the poor performance of Cadorna’s army, Diaz ordered all commanders to organise defensive positions on their own initiative immediately after an engagement had come to a halt, and simultaneously to link up with flanking units ‘whatever [the shape of] the front that results’.



Fig. 13 Anti-aircraft gun at Monte Nero

Retreat for fear of being turned or outflanked was 'formally and absolutely forbidden'. If the enemy broke through, commanders must create a defensive flank, seal the breakthrough and use reserves to form defensive compartments.⁶⁴ To ensure that his subordinates conformed with the new doctrines he was introducing, Diaz ordered his engineers when constructing trenches not to join up separate elements in order to counter 'the pernicious tendency' to put most of the available force into line, 'thereby subjecting it to rapid attrition and useless losses and, what is most important, thereby removing any possibility of manoeuvre in the event of an enemy attack'.⁶⁵

High on the list of priorities was the replacement and renewal of artillery. In the retreat from Caporetto the army had lost 2,116 guns, almost a third of its total park, and 1,732 trench mortars. Legend afterward had it that the armaments firm of Ansaldo had stepped up to the plate, offering the state six hundred 105-mm guns it had manufactured off its own bat. In reality, the plaudits belonged to Dallolio. The munitions programme for July 1916–June 1917 had fixed on a figure

of 7,031 guns for the year, but by the time it ended in June 1917 the armaments industry had only managed to deliver 1,845 guns. This kind of slippage gave the army a bad name: Riccardo Bianchi, the minister for transport in 1917–18, believed the military to be bad organisers with ‘a very curious idea of organization: to do anything they want an enormous excess of means and don’t think of ordering things in relation to the country’s means and needs’.⁶⁶ In fact there were good – as well probably as not so good – reasons why the armaments industry was falling so badly behind: the ongoing shortage of labour in the arms factories had still to be resolved, and Italy’s coal imports in 1917, amounting to 5,038,000 tons, were only 52 per cent of her needs. On 2 July 1917, Dallolio published the 1917–18 armaments programme, reducing the target to the more realistic total of 4,292 guns. By 30 November 1917 industry had already delivered 1,994 guns, 46.5 per cent of the annual total.

In fact, output of guns was on a rising curve from July 1917 until the end of the war. Although it only passed the pre-Caporetto total of 6,918 guns in October 1918, much of what had been lost was obsolescent or antiquated. In that respect Caporetto was not entirely the disaster it seemed at first sight. The steady increase in industrial output – matched in the automotive industry – was the result of a complex of industrial factors. Coal imports increased in 1918 to 5,840,300 tons, four-fifths of which now came overland from France not by sea from England as had been the case the year before. Domestic production of iron ore doubled, reaching 1,803,000 tons in 1917. Imports of semi-finished steel from France saved valuable coal. In May 1917, following the example set by the Allies, labour laws were relaxed to allow women to be employed in munitions factories and elsewhere, and by the end of the war 200,000 were working in the war industries. Finally, expert labour was released from the army, the number of exonerations rising from 256,351 at the end of October 1917 to 437,389 eleven months later.⁶⁷

Although Diaz was beginning to make strides in his efforts to increase the army’s fighting power, the commanders of the newly arrived British and French forces could see a great many faults that still needed remedying. Plumer was particularly critical of Italian staff work, which was theoretical and impractical.

Paper is the ruling factor, and they issue orders which cannot be carried out . . . All staffs are inclined to think that once an order is issued it is as good as done, which is far from being the case, and staff officers do not go out to see that the orders are being carried out.⁶⁸

Fayolle picked up the lack of method and organisation and added a litany of tactical defects, almost all of which Diaz was very well aware of.

Front lines were packed with troops and defences lacked depth, guns were pushed too far forward, and although the technical training of the artillery was good it lacked the spirit of co-operation with the infantry, did not know how to carry out destructive fire, and showed a marked reluctance to carry out counter-battery fire. Training was notably poor, chiefly because no measures appeared to have been taken to develop it: nothing was being done to train the reserve army other than a few exercises or marches at company level, and so far not a single divisional training ground had been established in the war zone. Only Capello, in charge of 5th Army, appeared to be occupying himself with problems connected to training. Fayolle estimated that there were forty-five usable Italian divisions, twenty-seven of which were fresh and the remainder tired. Morale was 'not bad' and could be improved with more food, an adequate system of turns in line, and regular leave.⁶⁹ When a copy of the report came into Diaz's hands in May 1918, he recognised that though in some respects out of date it contained some fair and accurate observations, and ordered that its contents be summarised and passed on to the army commanders.

Diaz was not left alone to get on with his job. In early January, worried by news that the Swiss–German frontier had been closed, Orlando warned him that another enemy offensive on the Piave or the *altipiani* might be in the offing. Diaz calmly reassured the premier that there was no other intelligence to that effect and no signs of an imminent enemy attack but all the necessary steps were in hand to employ the troops 'in the best possible way'. A few days afterwards, news of strikes in Austria prompted the premier to question whether the policy of non-fraternisation might not in fact mean the loss of possible opportunities to capitalise on the enemy's weakness. Two and a half hours later, another telegram to the field commander relayed reported dissatisfaction with troop rotations into and out of line.⁷⁰ Prime ministerial interference had to be borne, but parliamentary interference did not and Diaz complained about it. Senators and deputies were deluging him with letters about supposed shortcomings, most of which were unjustified or exaggerated and all of which created extra work. The unceasing enquiries were overwhelming his resources and thus threatening discipline. Shrewdly appealing to the premier's political instincts, he pointed out that changes and improvements were being attributed not to the government but to 'this or that protector, something which seems to me of great importance for the war and for what comes afterwards'.⁷¹

An important component of Diaz's reforms was the reorganisation of the intelligence services. Regulations issued on 10 January 1918 divided intelligence into two distinct activities: broader strategic intelligence on

both sides of the front was now the province of the *Servizio informazioni*, while local tactical intelligence gathered at and immediately behind either side of the fighting front by officers attached to army commands was the province of the *Servizio informazioni sul nemico presso le truppe operante* or ITO, responsible to the head of the *Ufficio situazione*, one of the branches of the *Comando supremo*. The heads of the intelligence centres attached to each army now met with their chief at least once a week to relay new information upwards and receive fresh instructions. The intelligence collection centres, eventually attached to every corps and to some divisions, gathered information from interrogations of prisoners of war and deserters, captured documents and correspondence, intercepts, and aerial reconnaissance. They also made use of 284 Czech, Yugoslav, Serbian, Polish and Romanian prisoner-of-war volunteers, whose role in propagandising their former comrades-in-arms would grow in importance. The results of the local centres' activities were checked against intelligence from the *Servizio informazioni*, from foreign military missions and from the domestic and foreign press before finally being shaped into a daily war bulletin and an authoritative fortnightly appreciation of the enemy's situation on the Italian front.⁷² With clear channels and an integrated structure, Diaz now had an efficient and increasingly effective instrument in his hands.

Over the spring and early summer intelligence work advanced. In February Giardino took advantage of the growing movement for independence within the Austro-Hungarian empire and assigned 24 officers and 260 men chosen from volunteer Czecho-Slovak, Yugoslav, Serbian, Polish and Romanian prisoners of war to 1st, 3rd and 4th Armies, considerably improving translation capabilities. They were given the same pay as Italians and special indemnities. From the end of May, Italian military intelligence began landing agents behind enemy lines and air-dropping carrier-pigeons to carry messages back. With naval co-operation, agents were inserted into enemy territory across Lake Garda and the Adriatic. Specially trained *Arditi* units recovered important documents from recently occupied enemy positions. In June a phototelemetry section was established, greatly improving the army's ability to locate enemy artillery.⁷³

A better understanding of the enemy's methods was a means both to strengthen the army's defensive capability and to improve its own fighting power. The international exchanges now taking place could involve some important indirect routes: in May 1917 the Allied intelligence and counter-espionage service in Paris passed on information from Russian sources about Austria-Hungary's use of *Sturmtruppen*. Though the Russian source dried up, an ever-increasing volume of intelligence

of all types became available during the last ten months of the war. German lessons drawn from the Flanders campaign in 1917 were used to illustrate more effective tactics: defensive artillery fire should be as close as possible to one's own front line, individual detachments should not try to halt enemy advances with counter-attacks that were easily beaten off but seek to slow them down, divisional counter-attacks should be under the command of the sector commander regardless of his seniority, and defences should not be so thick and high as to be easily recognisable.⁷⁴ Up-to-date information was circulated shortly after the March offensive began about the latest German methods of defence and attack, illustrating and emphasising the importance of depth and flexibility in the former and the advantages that could result from holding troops as far back as possible until the last moment in the latter.⁷⁵ In May 1918, the *Ufficio operazioni* began publishing a regular series of bulletins reporting on British and French operations on the western front and including translations of captured German and Austro-Hungarian documents dealing particularly with tactics, training, organisation and armaments. The learning process now taking place was helped by the fact that British and French units were located in Italy and Italian units in France.⁷⁶

At the beginning of February, Italian military intelligence reported information pointing to an enemy build-up along the mountain front with operations aimed at Brescia and Verona in the spring seemingly in view. Prisoners were being used for road works, notable quantities of ammunition and artillery were arriving, reinforcements were being sent up and shelters built. While none of this could be confirmed, it could reflect the enemy's intention to launch simultaneous offensives on the Franco-British and Italian fronts to prevent the Allies shifting troops from one theatre to the other. Counting the Central Powers' divisions suggested that they could pull sixty-one out of Russia, giving them a twenty-three-division superiority in France and a seven-division margin in Italy.⁷⁷ In early March information believed credible by the head of the Berne centre suggested that the Germans planned to attack Italy with twelve divisions in mid April – an action that would, military intelligence pointed out, be in tune with their guiding concept of concentrating on the weakest enemy. Although there was only fragmentary evidence to support it, Colonel Cavallero, head of the operations office, was inclined to believe it because, among other things, Italy's policy of reaching accords with the Slav populations of the Austro-Hungarian empire might be a sufficient inducement. Also, Austria's internal conditions might well impose on her the need for a major effort to put out of action 'the only enemy she has left to fear' – Italy.⁷⁸

By the beginning of March Diaz believed that the enemy was readying himself for a great effort in which the Italian front would be an important component, if not the principal one. The attack was most likely to come on the northern front, between the Val Giudicarie and Monte Grappa, though neither the western nor the eastern fronts could be excluded. Thanks to the reorganisation and re-equipment already carried out, he was confident that the army was ready to face any eventuality. Army commanders were instructed to prepare counter-offensives to meet any attack, and pre-emptive offensives to stifle it. Clearly learning from Cadorna's mistakes, Diaz spread out his nine reserve divisions between Lake Garda, Vicenza and Mestre in positions from which they could support the northern front or if necessary swing to reinforce the western front. If attacked, the army must resist to the last, looking to contain the enemy in the smallest possible space by means of swift counter-offensives and local counter-attacks.⁷⁹

The Germans' 'March Offensive' bore out Diaz's analysis, but not in the way he had imagined. It also threw a spanner into the Italian works. The immediate consequence was that he lost half his Allied contingent. Over the next three weeks four French divisions and one English division returned to France, accompanied by two Italian divisions whose transfer had been agreed just before the German attacks, leaving Diaz with three British and two French divisions. By the time that the last two French divisions left, evidence was building up that the Austrians were planning an offensive against Monte Grappa. There were also the political consequences of the German offensive to be considered. On 31 March General Giardino (who had replaced Cadorna at Versailles) reported the decision taken at Doullens five days earlier to give Foch strategic direction of Allied operations in France and warned that premier Georges Clemenceau intended to extend the arrangement to the Italian front. His advice to Diaz was to find some way of acknowledging Foch as *generalissimo*. At issue was not the different situation on the two fronts but whether or not Italy remained isolated 'without a voice at Versailles and without [any] direct connection to the general war – that is a risk'.⁸⁰ Two days later Clemenceau asked Orlando to adhere to the Doullens accords, just as Giardino had warned he would.

The decision effectively creating a unified Allied command threatened Diaz's authority and his plans. He objected forcefully to giving up *Comando nazionale* for *Comando unico*, claimed that the French did not understand Italy's situation and her natural environment, and deplored the French tendency to consider the Italian front as subsidiary to the western front.⁸¹ Behind these complaints lay a fundamental divergence of views. Diaz's strategy was designed to knock out Austria-Hungary,

the weaker prop of the Central Powers. Foch wanted to defeat Germany. Orlando was in two minds about what to do, fearing French interference in Italy's war but recognising at the same time that it might be the way to get more Allied troops in action on the Italian front. The decision taken by the Supreme War Council at Abbeville on 2 May extending Foch's co-ordinating powers to the Italian front and giving him overall command if Allied armies fought together there was a mixed blessing. Italy remained military master in its own house, but only so long as the Allied aid that Diaz wanted did not arrive in force. On the other hand, Italy was now part of a single strategic front extending from the North Sea to the Adriatic, and the possibility that Allied armies might indeed be put into play to defeat the Austrians was now rather more likely.⁸²

From this time onwards, Italian generals and statesmen came under ever-increasing Allied pressure to take the offensive. Although it was not apparent to outsiders, the army was as yet by no means strong enough to be confident of the outcome. Diaz had therefore to resist pressure to commit his troops to what he rightly regarded as a premature action and fortunately he had a strong and well-placed political ally to support him – the recently appointed Treasury minister, Francesco Nitti. Widely believed to be after the premiership himself in due course, Nitti's immediate goal was to win the war in such a way as not to compromise Italy's future, which meant adopting a military policy of not wearing down Italian manpower until a decisive battle or battles could be fought. Nitti was well placed to exert influence: he knew Capello, the duke of Aosta and a number of other generals and admirals personally, his wife and Diaz's wife were friends, and Orlando seemed content mostly to leave day-to-day cabinet oversight of military policy in his hands. When he learned of the decision to create a unified Allied command under Foch, taken at a meeting at which the Italian representative, General Giardino, had not been present, he joined Orlando and Diaz in strongly opposing *Comando unico*. Then, at Abbeville on 2 May, Orlando sold that pass by accepting the principle of 'co-ordination'.

Although the German attacks on the Lys had been stopped, the French feared new ones and were more than a little unhappy that Italy was as militarily immobile as Austria-Hungary. As pressure for action from Foch and the French ambassador in Rome, Camille Barrère, mounted Nitti grew increasingly alarmed lest Italy lose at least partial control of the war. Militarily, Italy was fighting her own war and should look after her own interests by counting only on herself. She faced a nation of 53 million people with a long military tradition and the possibility of drawing on Bulgarian, Turkish and perhaps also German reserves. If Italy tried an offensive and did not get the desired results, he reasoned, who would

come to her aid? ‘We are Italians, and we must save Italy,’ he told Diaz in mid May. ‘I urge you therefore to listen only to your [own] conscience and choose the offensive or the defensive (as a general programme, be it understood) only according to its military suitability.’⁸³ With the third anniversary of the war about to occur, and Bissolati too pressing for an offensive, Nitti urged Diaz to stand firm. The army had been reconstituted with enough guns and ammunition for defence ‘and perhaps to attack’, there was now enough grain to last till the harvest, enough coal, and the socialists were divided and mostly benevolent if not favourable towards the war. Six months earlier such a position would have been inconceivable. But this was not the time to dare, or to show weakness in the face of Allied pressure: if Italy gave way she would finish up like Serbia, Romania or Russia. Diaz must have ‘a firm will and nerves of steel’.⁸⁴

Hearing that Orlando was on his way to the front to agree a coming battle, Nitti told Diaz not to pay any attention to the minister or to parliament but to think only of the military situation. As he saw it, the French were trying to weaken Italy and decide the great duel on the western front. An Italian offensive would have the advantage for the French of distracting German forces. ‘But would it not be the death of us?’ he asked. ‘We now have 20 or 30 fewer divisions than Austria. Do they want to send us to the slaughter-house?’ Nitti was prepared to be faithful to the alliance – but not to be sacrificed to it. Italy was playing its last card and must play it wisely.⁸⁵

Prisoners of war

If life at the front for Cadorna’s troops was unremittingly hard, it was worse for the 600,000 Italians who were unlucky enough to be made prisoners of war. Under the terms of the 1907 Hague Convention, to which Italy had adhered, prisoners were to be maintained at the expense of the ‘host’ government and receive treatment equal to that accorded to its own troops. Parcels could be sent to individuals as long as they were the result of private initiative. Britain and France modified these terms as the war went along. Arrangements were made to send wagon-loads of food for general distribution at state expense, to transfer wounded and sick prisoners to Switzerland and to exchange certain categories of prisoners. Flint-hearted generals and politicians ensured that Italy did almost nothing to succour its prisoners of war – if anything, quite the reverse. As a result 100,000 of them – a figure equal to one-sixth of the deaths in combat – never returned. Mostly they died of malaria, tuberculosis and dropsy brought on by hunger.

The first reports about conditions in the camps which began to circulate early in 1916 were reassuring, though they were not in fact accurate. The *Comando supremo* grew alarmed: desertion would only be encouraged by the supposed attractions of prison. The government was told in no uncertain terms that it must publicise everything that put the treatment of Italian prisoners in a bad light. Stories that the Austrians were seizing prisoners' parcels for their own population, which began to circulate as the first realistic (and bad) news about conditions started to emerge, were denied by the Italian Red Cross but encouraged by the government. Thousands of individual parcels began piling up at the frontier due to maladministration, a dysfunction officially attributed to the enemy. Censorship ensured that reassuring news from the camps was stifled, but nothing was done to prevent the press publishing information about poor treatment. As Porro explained to the premier, 'such news is a corrective to the fancy to desert'. If the enemy were to threaten reprisals over the exaggerated stories of what was happening to Italian prisoners, then the prisoners' families would 'certainly find in their patriotism the strength to put up with the fate of their loved ones'.⁸⁶

Politicians were every bit as adamant as generals in their determination to do nothing to help captured Italian soldiers. None was more determined than Sonnino who opposed giving prisoners of war any state aid whatsoever. It would be a cost to Italy; the Hague Convention made it clear that Austria-Hungary was responsible for looking after its prisoners; and if it were to be provided there was no guarantee that it would get through. Boselli agreed with him. However, the policy only applied to the rank and file and not to the 19,500 officers who were prisoners of war. While the Italian Red Cross was only allowed to organise private parcels for individual soldiers, it was permitted to provide collective aid for officers in the shape of wagon-loads of food, clothing and other necessities. The costs were initially met by the Red Cross, which was then reimbursed from the officers' bank accounts or by their families. As officers were given pay by the Austrian and German governments, as well as getting money from their families and personal parcels, they enjoyed better conditions than the men they had commanded. This was reflected in the statistics of mortality. In all, 550 officers died in prison camps, their annual death rate of 2 per cent being one-sixth that of the men.⁸⁷

The first seriously wounded prisoners of war got back to Italy in October 1916 and began to speak about their experiences. By the start of 1917 their reports were in the newspapers. The army was more than happy for returned prisoners of war to report on their maltreatment and

thereby propagandise the troops: as the war minister General Morrone explained to Sonnino, ‘the soldiers must be inspired by the horror of prison’. Morrone wanted to go tighten the screw yet more, stopping all food parcels and public subscriptions ‘because such aid, known to our soldiers, would confirm them in the belief that prisoners one way or another manage to do alright’.⁸⁸ Things did indeed get worse for Italian prisoners of war during 1917, due as much to the actions of their own government as to the growing economic stresses bearing down on their captors. Any prisoner of war helping another who was accused of desertion or of some lesser crime lost the right to family aid. In early October an official ordinance forbade the inclusion in individual aid parcels of bread, wine, grapes, fruit, cheese, meat, fish, any goods such as sugar, shoes and leather that the enemy might be short of, civilian clothes and articles of uniform.

Official policy did not change greatly after Caporetto, and where it did it was for the worse. Thanks to Cadorna’s publicising of the idea of ‘voluntary surrenders’, the walking skeletons who now inhabited what they called ‘camps for the dying’ were castigated by D’Annunzio as ‘shirkers beyond the Alps’. Aid wagons for officers were temporarily suspended, and thanks to Sonnino no packages of any kind were allowed for prisoners of war in Germany until February 1918. In the same month the government passed a decree giving the Italian Red Cross sole right to send bread to prisoners of war – the only formal government act for the support of prisoners of war passed during the entire war. Prisoners’ families now had the ability to send other foodstuffs. To do so, they had to obtain a special permit from the *Carabinieri*. Prisoners guilty or suspected of desertion, or of a comparable crime, got no parcels at all because their families were denied the necessary permit. The effect of all this, and of the increase in the population of the camps after Caporetto, was to swamp the offices handling parcels and letters. The frontiers had to be closed in March and April 1918, the sending of parcels was temporarily forbidden, hundreds of packages were destroyed or had to be repacked to remove parts of their contents, and 17 tons of post that had built up at the censors’ offices was destroyed.⁸⁹ To make matters worse, aid arrived sporadically (during offensives no wagons got to the frontier at all), and when it did it was often in a ruinous state because railway carriages that would not or were not shut let in the rain, or had been packed too full so that heat ruined the contents.

Until the summer of 1918 there was no widespread sense of how bad things were in the Austrian and German camps and tales of ‘atrocities’ were regarded as lying enemy propaganda. When, in June, Diaz learned

enough of the truth, he demanded reprisals against the prisoners of war held in Italy. Sonnino coolly pointed out that the Austrians had three times as many Italians as Italy had Austrians, and that in any case half of the Austro-Hungarian prisoners belonged to the sub-nationalities and would have to be excluded. In August Italy at last experimented briefly with a system of state-funded aid, sending single wagon-loads of biscuit. All along, the government's overriding concern was to ensure that the rank and file in the army were thoroughly disabused of any notion that being captured might be a good thing and that prisoner-of-war camps were an agreeable or at least a tolerable way of sitting out the war. Returning prisoners of war were suspect to the last. In mid September 1918, on the basis of evidence supplied by the prefect of Rome, the interior ministry believed that the Austrians were repatriating the worst elements, particularly those who had contributed to the disaster at Caporetto, and that they had given undertakings to engage in 'propaganda or worse against our war effort'.⁹⁰ The authorities remained implacable to the end: on 3 October Alfieri told Orlando that because of the army's needs it was 'absolutely impossible to give our prisoners of war even the minimum amount of clothing'.⁹¹

To begin with Italy had few Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war to handle. The first significant influx came in October 1915 when the



Fig. 14 Serving out rations to prisoners

retreating Serbs brought 24,000 officers and men with them. They were interned on the island of Asinara where, in the blackest episode in this story, some 7,000 died from cholera (which they brought with them), typhus and tuberculosis before the remainder were shipped to France in the summer of 1916.⁹² By January 1917 the total number of prisoners of war in Italy had climbed to 79,978, lodged in 111 camps. On the day that the battle of Vittorio Veneto began the figure had reached 180,000, and in the last ten days of the war the army took another 300,000 prisoners.

Conditions in the Italian camps were, or were perceived to be, fairly relaxed and comfortable to begin with: the regulations allowed prisoners of war the same rations as Italian soldiers in peacetime (as were Italian prisoners in Austrian camps until the blockade began to bite in 1917), and table wine and beer too if they could afford it. In January 1916 the *Comando supremo* circulated extracts from prisoners' letters describing 'the excellent Italian treatment' they were receiving and rejoicing in being 'among men of culture'. This was of course by no means the whole picture, and Austrian prisoners of war complained about reductions in rations, narrow cells infested with mice, the impossibility of getting proper exercise, being forced to work in malaria-infested regions, and especially about the harsh punishments handed out for minor acts of indiscipline.⁹³ Complaints of extreme punishments were summarily rejected at the time, though afterwards the foreign ministry's representative on the joint Italian–Austrian prisoner-of-war commission acknowledged that they had some force and that the Italian authorities had sometimes acted 'with intemperate zeal'.⁹⁴ As far as the general population was concerned, the treatment being given to the enemy was far too relaxed. In August 1915 the mayor of Pavia complained to Salandra that Italian cities had been 'invaded' by 'lazy' prisoners who cost the state a great deal and gave it nothing in return, and a year later in the chamber of deputies General Morrone was grilled about the civilian clothes, cultural visits, dinners, suppers and games of football supposedly being enjoyed by the occupants of the camps.⁹⁵

For both sides prisoners of war were an obvious source of labour, and also a legitimate one: Article 6 of the 1907 Hague Convention allowed for the employment of other ranks, but not officers, on work that was not directly connected with the war. General Spingardi, who was in charge of prisoner-of-war affairs at the war ministry, enquired in July 1915 whether agricultural workers could be used. The answer he got – in December – was that work could only be done in the camps. Pressures on manpower were too great for such a policy to last, and in May 1916 the authorities decided to allow the 'exceptional' use of prisoner-of-war labour to

meet needs 'that cannot otherwise be provided for'.⁹⁶ At first only a few thousand were used to help bring in the harvest, but in 1917 demand intensified and that year roughly 80,000 prisoners of war worked in the countryside, down the mines or building roads. At the year's end Spingardi was able to report to Orlando that 'other than those unable to work and the sick, no-one has been allowed to loaf'.⁹⁷ By the following April 130,000 prisoners of war were making a contribution to the Italian war economy: 60,000 were working in agriculture, 30,000 were cutting wood or peat and mining lignite, 2,153 were working on the railways and another 1,098 were employed by Ansaldo.

As well as providing much-needed labour, prisoners of war were also a potential resource in the undermining of Austria-Hungary. As such they became increasingly important contributors to Italian strategy in the last year of the conflict as both sides waged energetic propaganda wars against one another. In June 1916 prisoners had been split into two national groups, Slavs (Bohemians, Poles, Slovaks and Croats) and Germans and Hungarians, in order to prevent 'friction' and to avoid 'discussions of a political character'. After the meeting of the Congress of the Oppressed Nationalities in Rome on 8-10 April 1918, Italy took on a leading role in propagating their cause, though there was considerable ambiguity in the government's position. At this stage Orlando still backed Sonnino's policy of not breaking up the Austro-Hungarian empire, and the Italian government only issued a statement acknowledging the Yugoslav movement for independence as 'corresponding to the principles for which the Entente is fighting' as late as 25 September 1918.⁹⁸

Militarily, though, there was something to be gained from backing some if not all of the parties in the developing sub-nationalities *mêlée*. Czechs, Poles and Romanians were the preferred nations – and the ones Italy would privilege when it came to the order in which prisoners were released after the war ended. An agreement reached at Palazzo Braschi in April 1918 resulted in the formation of a Czech Legion which by October numbered more than 3,000 men (only eighteen of whom were Slovaks). Another 12,000 former Czech prisoners of war were integrated into Montuori's 4th Army. In February 1918 General Alfieri supported the creation of a Polish Legion, but although men were trained it never reached the front line. The collapse of Russia forced Romania to come to terms with the Central Powers on 7 May 1918, but Romanian volunteers fought on the Piave in the last days of the war. Among the leftovers after Russia exited from the war were 30,000 Austro-Italian prisoners from the Trentino and Trieste. Offered their freedom if they fought with Italy, 2,500 of them accepted.

The battle of the Solstice

After holding off two Hindenburg offensives, Foch pressed Diaz at the beginning of May to attack ‘without delay’. On the premise that the Austrians were numerically inferior on the Italian front and were showing ‘no offensive will’, he asked for the general outlines of his plan of attack, the role to be played by Allied forces, and the date. Diaz assured Foch that he was fully signed up to the principal of action as soon as the moment was favourable, ‘one of the immutable laws of war’, and then laid out the reasons why he did not propose to act on the request. Austrian strength was at least equal to that of Italy, and he was not disposed to put too much weight on the supposedly vulnerable state of Austrian morale. The enemy’s inaction was likely due to a combination of the uncertain situation in Russia and the weather, which was improving. If he went beyond the limited operation on the Asiago *altopiano* that was in the planning stage, he would have to use the ten divisions currently being kept as a general reserve. This would allow the enemy either to achieve a local superiority on other sectors of the front or ‘to start a vast counter-offensive when ours stopped, either of which would find us without adequate reserves to deploy’. If he was going to accede to Foch’s request, Diaz first wanted assurances about the reinforcements that the Allies would give him. Evidence that the Austrians were planning an attack, and the inability of the Allies to launch counter-offensives on the western front, strengthened his determination not to be pushed into premature action and underpinned a request for yet more Allied assistance with foodstuffs, raw materials and coal.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, he was prepared to undertake a limited offensive on the Asiago *altopiano* starting on 18 June to help the allies, now under pressure from Hindenburg’s third offensive on the Aisne that began on 27 May.

The Austrians were indeed planning an offensive. On 23 March 1918, Emperor Karl approved the outline of a plan for a ‘clamorous victory’ against Italy. His chief of staff, General Arz von Straussenberg, promised that it would take Austrian armies to the Adige and bring about Italy’s military collapse. The Austrians intended to launch major attacks on the Tonale pass and on the Asiago *altopiano* and Monte Grappa, with a secondary push on Treviso, to force the Italians to abandon the Piave. Aware of increased Italian activity intercepting and deciphering their communications, they ordered the complete cessation of radio communications in April, removed just before the battle, and cut back on telephone communications, forbidding any telephone activity while preparations were made for the attack.

By spring 1918 Italian military intelligence was in some difficulties. A regular trickle of deserters and prisoners began to dry up after the enemy had been thrown back behind the Piave, and air reconnaissance was proving inadequate in identifying enemy units and pinpointing their locations. In one section of the line, north of Ponte di Piave, there was no contact whatever with the enemy for several months, which worried the head of 3rd Army intelligence, Colonel Ercole Smaniotto. His solution was to insert agents into the main enemy centre at Vittorio Veneto and at Pordenone, where the main railway artery could be observed. An agent was put in by air at Vittorio (Veneto) on 30/31 May, but communication by carrier-pigeon proved difficult and he was reduced to using sheets to signal. The first written message did not get back until 29 June. Three attempts to land agents for Pordenone failed. The battle of the Solstice would eliminate the three small areas of direct contact with the enemy, and dry up the trickle of prisoners of war. To fill the intelligence gap, seven agents were subsequently inserted directly by aircraft, seaplane and MAS torpedo boat to watch and report on troop movements.¹⁰⁰ After initial hesitations the first parachute drop of an agent, Second-Lieutenant Alessandro Tandurra, took place on 9 August 1918.

There were, though, enough sources of intelligence to indicate that the Austrians intended to launch an offensive on the Piave with subsidiary actions on the Asiago *altopiano* and at Monte Grappa. Deserters brought information about the movement of troops from the Trentino to the Piave and practice assaults using pontoons on the river Livenza. Six days before the battle Italian intelligence knew that the main front would extend from the Asiago to the lower Piave with a secondary action in the Val Lagarina. They also knew that no German troops would be taking part.¹⁰¹ On 14 June an Italian radio interception station picked up the exact time when the Austrian offensive would start. Colonel Finzi, head of 6th Army intelligence, confirmed the time and date of the attack, 0300 hours on 15 June, and Colonel Marchetti, head of 1st Army intelligence, was able to confirm the limit of the attack front east of Astico. This enabled Badoglio to get the artillery ready to crush the attackers and Diaz to make better use of his reserves. Some commanders, though, preferred their own intelligence: 8th Army planned a changeover of troops on the night of 14/15 June, and 3rd Army took no immediate measures for counter-preparation.

On 12 June Foch renewed his pressure on Diaz, pointing out that the expected Austrian attack had not come and encouraging Diaz to go back to the original plan. The double Austrian offensive began next day with an attack on Tonale. The Italian positions there had been improved thanks to a brilliant action by *Alpini* in the previous month, and as a result

the Austrians took only two summits before they were brought to a halt. The main offensive began two days later. On the Asiago *altopiano* the guns of General Montuori's 6th Army opened up half an hour before the Austrian attack began. British and French divisions lost their positions but took them back with immediate counter-attacks. The Austrians were able to take three mountains and held them against counter-attacks until the end of June.

Monte Grappa was a different story. The centre had been well fortified but the position had no depth and the flanks were only lightly held. Thanks to a thick fog the Austrians were able to stave in the position held by General Emilio De Bono's IX Corps, defending the left slopes. In less than five hours they had broken through three lines of defences and were only 5 kilometres as the crow flew from the plains below. The attack was held thanks to effective artillery fire by 6th Army, which sealed the battlefield and prevented the Austrians from bringing up reinforcements. The situation was retrieved by assault troops led by Major Giovanni Messe (who would command Italian troops in Russia and North Africa in the next world war). De Bono was adjudged to have done well: promoted to lieutenant-general two days after the battle ended and awarded a third *medaglia d'argento*, he ensured his celebrity by composing a popular song about the battle.¹⁰²

Where Conrad's attacks in the mountains had failed, Borojević's on the plain initially succeeded. The Austrian attack began at 0330 hours and three Austrian divisions got across the Piave under cover of fog in the first two hours. The Austrians threw six bridges and fourteen footbridges across the Piave in the first three days, pushing back a thin line of Italian defenders and taking the heights of Montello and a strip a few kilometres wide running from Grave di Papadopoli to the sea. Then, at 0800 hours on 18 June, the summer floods began. Over the next twelve hours the river rose dramatically, taking a further twenty-four hours to go down. With this the battle split into dozens of small engagements in a stretch 22 kilometres long and up to 5 kilometres deep. Italian defences, initially overwhelmed, were saved by artillery and aircraft attacks on the pontoon bridges thrown over the river by the Austrians. The Austrians rebuilt them at night, and Italian guns and aircraft knocked them down again during the hours of daylight. When the river fell, the battle entered its second and final stage. As the Austrian supply situation grew critical, 600 Italian aircraft joined the guns and attacked the remaining bridges and the enemy troops on the west bank. At 1916 hours on 20 June, in the face of violent Italian counter-attacks, Emperor Karl ordered Borojević to retire, which he did over the next three days.



Fig. 15 Troops in a front-line trench on Monte Grappa, 1918

Both sides made full use of intelligence during the battle, the Italians doing better than their enemy. Before it began the Austrians knew the location of the Italian army commands, twenty corps commands and forty-one divisional commands, and during it they picked up lots of information about the enemy's situation and losses. For their part, the Italians took telephones away from front-line company commanders and used searchlights, flares, optical means or runners to communicate between commands. On the fifth day of the battle the capture of part of the Austrian cipher enabled the Italian cryptographic service to learn that the enemy had committed all his reserves and that therefore there would be no more surprises. Intercept stations, particularly one on Monte Grappa, provided useful near real-time information. Away from the front, Italian intelligence was busy corrupting telegraph officials to get duplicate copies of telegrams, and pilfering copies from neutral post and telegraph offices.¹⁰³

The battle blooded Diaz's army, but it also showed up ongoing weaknesses. Some units proved fragile, mainly due to inadequate numbers of junior officers and non-commissioned officers and deficiencies in their training; some counter-attacks were poorly directed or too precipitous; and artillery-infantry co-operation still left something to be desired. The training of junior officers, long one of the army's gravest weaknesses, was now taken firmly in hand. The grade of *aspirante* (officer candidate) was abolished and training courses, which increased in length from two

months to five with a final sixth month in the march battalions (replacement units), were removed from individual armies and centralised in five schools overseen by an inspector general. Platoon, company and battalion commanders attended special courses, and monthly divisional exercises were mandated under the direction of army commands.¹⁰⁴ Expanding the army's knowledge base was every bit as important as improving its intellectual capacities. Thus after the battle, 3rd Army issued a collection of studies of enemy operations during it based on a large trove of captured enemy documents. A detailed statistical analysis of the thousands of prisoners revealed that the enemy were making much less use of Czech soldiers – now a dubious quantity – on the Italian front and were relying more heavily on Poles, Croats and Hungarians 'three of the races on whom the monarchy has up to now been able to count unreservedly'.¹⁰⁵

The 'battle of the bridges' cost the Italians 85,000 in dead, wounded, missing and prisoners of war. Austrian losses amounted to 143,000 men. The river had played an important part, and the Italians knew it: when the general commanding the *brigata Mantova* reached it on 24 June, he knelt down and kissed the water. The guns, too, had played a crucial role, firing 3,500,000 rounds in the course of the engagement. In cities across Italy a jubilant population celebrated: 40,000 turned out in Naples, and in Turin 100,000 crowded into Piazza Castello and swore a collective oath 'to resist, bearing any sacrifice, until victory'.¹⁰⁶

The Italians had achieved more than either they or their allies realised at the time. The Austrians dated the beginning of their collapse from their failure on the Piave, and Hindenburg too saw it as the end of any Austrian threat to Italy. One thing alone clouded the victory. On 19 June Major Francesco Baracca, Italy's leading fighter ace with thirty victories to his credit, was shot down over Montello while strafing enemy lines. The king wrote in sympathy to his mother, the royal family was represented at his funeral, and in the inter-war years he was adopted by the Fascist regime as a model hero. Roads, squares and schools were named after him, as was the aeroplane in which Italo Balbo flew the Atlantic in the winter of 1930–1 and a submarine which, like its namesake, also went down, sunk in the Atlantic by the British on 8 September 1941.¹⁰⁷

Vittorio Veneto

On the day that the battle of the Solstice ended Orlando congratulated Diaz and asked whether the Austrian collapse did not open the way for an energetic pursuit of a broken enemy. Diaz, who had only six complete divisions left after the battle, was determined not to put the ultimate goal

of winning the war at risk by undertaking what he regarded as adventurous operations. 'Did it not seem enough to throw the enemy back so decisively?' he complained to his wife. 'People have been dreaming of returning onto the Carso and going to Vienna. And who is going to give me the troops to carry out these flights [of fancy]?'¹⁰⁸ He did, though, see the victory on the Piave as the stepping-stone to greater things. Over the next two months he waged a paper offensive to try to persuade Foch that the Italian front was Germany's weak point and therefore the place with a decisive potential for the Allies. An Italian offensive in the mountains wore out the troops to no purpose. The solution to the war was a resolute offensive to defeat Austria, which would isolate Germany and lead to her fall. Struggling to halt the German offensive on the Chemin des Dames, Foch ruled out an inter-Allied offensive in Italy but pressed Diaz to attack in the mountains in order to open up the road to Trento and Feltre as a preliminary to a general offensive in September. Unless the Italians first extended their occupation of the mountain front between Pasubio and Monte Grappa, there could be no question of an offensive beyond Fiume.¹⁰⁹

With no prospect of any immediate help from the British and French, Diaz's mind turned to the possibility of getting American troops in his theatre. Orlando quickly ruled that out of court because of the enormous political ructions it would surely cause. Like Foch, the premier thought that Austria had suffered a serious defeat on the Piave, and that its internal condition ruled out any rapid reconstitution of the army. It was doubtful whether an injection of German strength would be enough to change that. Italy should agree to an offensive that coincided with the general Allied offensive that Foch was planning for September, but insist on Allied help if the Germans came to Austria's aid.¹¹⁰ Sticking to his last, Diaz advised Foch that Austria-Hungary might renew the offensive on his front, that he was keeping up the pressure on the Austrians with a series of local attacks, but that he was short of replacements and needed matériel, including 1,000 trucks and 25 tanks. Foch pressed for details of the operations Diaz was planning to undertake, withholding the tanks until both parties agreed on when and how they would be used.¹¹¹ In reply he was told that Diaz's plans were for 'a strong push on the Asiago *altopiano* with the aim of gaining space and allowing a similar advance on [Monte] Grappa'. For the time being though there was no question of an offensive on the Piave which would be 'neither opportune nor convenient in terms of direction, objectives and results'. The operations had to be carried out before the weather closed in in October, but nothing could be done without 30 tons of yprite and 60,000 gas shells for the artillery, a small number of tanks, and replacements.¹¹²

Having broken the final German attack in the Ludendorff offensive launched on 15 July, Foch wanted to exploit the situation as quickly as possible and heighten the shock effect on enemy morale. He now offered Diaz the gas, the gas shells and seventy-five tanks. He was not, however, prepared to part with any of the 70,000 Italian soldiers sent in January as a labour force. Diaz was far from happy with the offer. He now wanted at least 1,500 lorries but, most importantly he needed at a minimum 45,000 of the Italian workers as the 50,000 replacements he currently had were not enough to undertake a major action.¹¹³ Foch thought Diaz was dragging his feet. 'You have everything you need to act in the way of men and matériel when you decide to do so,' he told the Italian. 'The circumstances are most favourable, which it would seem ought to hasten your decision.' Diaz assured him that planning was already under way, and would be completed by September. He proposed to attack using twenty-one Italian and five Allied divisions, almost his entire force. However, once the battle was over he would not be able to replace the losses. Calculations by his staff suggested that Austria-Hungary had 40,000 replacements available, to which would be added the 350,000 men of the class of 1900 and prisoners of war returning from Russia, while the Italian class of 1900 would probably only produce 200,000 recruits. Finally, he had to have the lorries, which were 'indispensable'.¹¹⁴

During that summer many people did not see the full consequences of Austria-Hungary's failure on the Piave. Nitti was one of them. French pressure was growing more intense with every day that passed, and now Sonnino, concerned that Italy's apparent unwillingness to collaborate with her ally at a decisive moment might mean her losing out at the peace table, added his voice to those of Foch and Camille Barrère. In late June, considerably overrating the enemy's potential, the Treasury minister suggested to Diaz that more potent enemy attacks might be in the offing, perhaps backed up with German resources, and warned that the illusion that she had escaped from danger might actually be a serious threat to Italy. By now, though, Diaz had no need of Cassandra-like utterances to buttress his earlier caution. Nitti was told that the dangers were no longer as great as they had been and that he was being too pessimistic.¹¹⁵ After Foch began his offensive on 8 August, Nitti again urged Diaz to resist pressure to attack, and in the first week of September he was still counselling against any offensive action without direct Allied aid to back it up.

While the great men were wrangling with one another, combat knowledge was steadily improving. General Giardino returned from Versailles in May with a 'treasury' of practical knowledge and new theories of war

he had learned from the defenders of the Somme.¹¹⁶ To it Diaz and Badoglio added an analysis of the technical and tactical lessons of the battle of the Solstice. A number of important lessons were drawn from it. The location of the main elements of defence must be concealed from the enemy by camouflage; the movement of troops and supplies must take place at night; and deceptive plans based on false objectives and simulated targets must conceal true intentions. There was a vitally important distinction between immediate counter-attacks, to be carried out locally by commanders on the spot without waiting for artillery preparation, and counter-offensives carried out by fresh and well-prepared reserves. Badoglio lectured army corps chiefs of staff on the importance of keeping divisions intact and not breaking them up, as they were the best instrument with which to carry out the counter-attacks which were 'the most effective means of defence'.¹¹⁷ The commandant general of engineers, General Marieni, echoing Diaz, emphasised the importance of deploying machine-guns in front of the trenches to foil infiltrations and counter attacks. Drawing lessons was one thing, though, and learning them was another. Almost none of the lower commands were studying the way the enemy fought, Diaz complained; it was from that knowledge that 'opportune employment of our forces derives'.¹¹⁸ In July he organised a special section of the *Comando supremo* to monitor the disposition of his own armies and report any changes or reinforcements that were necessary.

In September 1918 new regulations for attack by divisions (*grandi unità*) were issued. Described as 'the principal doctrinal innovation of the war', they marked a transition from positional warfare to a war of movement. The application of maximum force on a narrow front, the importance of surprise, and the role of camouflage and deception in masking intentions were the core of the new doctrine. The master concept was the 'breakthrough battle' to open a breach through which reserves could irrupt. The method to be used, which resembled that embodied in French regulations issued in December 1917, prescribed a series of articulated attacks co-ordinated rapidly to succeed one another. Preparatory fire was now to aim at neutralisation rather than destruction. The object was to achieve as much penetration as possible so that reserves could be used not against zones of resistance but where there was most progress. Artillery was once again advised, as it had been for some months, that it must move forward quickly to support and protect the attacking infantry.¹¹⁹

The new doctrine represented an advance on what had gone before, but although the army as a whole began to receive flame-throwers, Stokes mortars and light 37-mm trench guns during the course of 1918 it still

lacked the volume of firepower, manoeuvre capacity and penetration strength needed to develop widespread infiltration tactics of the kind being used on the western front. Tanks were virtually unknown and armoured cars only arrived on the eve of Vittorio Veneto, along with yprite from France which proved a more effective agent in neutralising enemy artillery in mountainous areas. The war ended before experiments in mobile warfare could get beyond the developmental stage. Only the specialist assault corps, formed in the summer and composed of *Arditi*, *Bersaglieri*, cavalry and cyclists, which was lightly armed (all its equipment and weapons were designed so that they could be broken into pieces and carried on the backs of men and mules) had anything like the capability that the British, French, German and Austrian armies were developing, and it was not a suitable model for dissemination across the army at large.

On 21 August, orders went out from the *Comando supremo* to prepare actions designed to deepen the positions on the Asiago *altopiano* in order to secure a more economical defensive line and a favourable starting point for future operations against Trento or the Feltre basin. Five days later a top secret directive from Badoglio asked the commanders of 3rd and 8th Armies for plans to force the line of the Piave. Eighth Army's objective was the heights of Valdobbiadene, 3rd Army's the line of the river Livenza.¹²⁰ Orlando, aware that Foch's second offensive had begun, pressed the *Comando supremo* to move more quickly and more convincingly. Neither Diaz nor his subordinates were going to be hurried. 'Give me a written order to attack,' Badoglio apparently told the premier, 'and I'll tell you how many minutes later I'll resign.'¹²¹ Diaz took himself off to Paris between 30 August and 6 September, and in talks with Foch, Pershing and others again pushed the line that a major inter-Allied offensive against Austria could have enormous results but to do it required another twenty to twenty-five divisions. In default of such an offensive he wanted the Allied general reserve located in Italy so as to protect her against another attack and be on the spot when the time came for a major assault. He came back empty-handed.

Four days after Diaz left Versailles, the Supreme War Council's Note 37 declared that decisive victory required the complete defeat of the German army, only achievable on the western front. Other theatres would be subordinate contributors to the overarching goal. Italy's role over the coming winter and spring would be to continue to wear down the enemy in preparation for a general Allied offensive in spring 1919, to which she would then contribute with an offensive *in grande stile*. Foch exhorted the Italians to fulfil their share of the joint strategy by attacking in the Trentino. The *Comando supremo* was less than happy with

the French *generalissimo's* design, seeing a Trentino offensive as strategically unproductive, risking a Carso-type undertaking, and opening up the possibility for a dangerous Austrian move on Piave.

Aosta's and Cavaglia's staffs sent in their plans and on 14 September – the day on which Austria–Hungary approached Italy for non-binding discussions about ending the war – Diaz adopted what was now an outline for a dual offensive. At the same time he provided Orlando – whom he thought likely to push Italy into unwise adventures – with strategic guidance for the premier's discussions in Paris. Once more Diaz refused to be hurried into what he believed would be premature action. As well as lacking adequate reinforcements, he had lost nine English battalions. Until they were replaced the only Allied support available amounted to two French divisions. Any major action by Italy must be 'subordinated to the most favourable situation'. Diaz sketched three scenarios in which he would be prepared to act: either repercussions from decisive victories in France, or serious internal risings in enemy countries, or armed support in the shape of more troops. If the government explicitly ordered him to act he would of course do so, he told Orlando, but he would have then to use the class of 1900. That would in turn have serious repercussions on operations in 1919. Orlando assured him that he would never order an action that was not fully and freely supported by the military authorities and left for Paris, determined that Italy must at all costs avoid finding herself in a situation in which the Allies did not assume the responsibility to act but left her with 'the responsibility for not acting'.¹²² Always dubious about Orlando's reliability – he was after all a politician – Diaz advised the now absent premier that he would launch an all-out offensive only if the situation on the French front was in its favour. Otherwise he would continue with minor operations in order to fix Austrian forces and start his offensive when the French resumed theirs. If, however, they met with a decisive check, 'I think we must seriously consider the likelihood . . . of an Austro-German attack in Italy, whom they would think their weakest adversary.'¹²³

Diaz stood his ground again at a war committee meeting on 21–22 September, citing evidence of Austrian troop concentrations north of Montello and on the river Livenza to support his refusal to have anything to do with Foch's favoured offensive. He said nothing about the plans his staff were developing. Then suddenly part of the enemy front buckled. Marshal Franchet d'Espérey's troops defeated the Bulgarians at the battle of Dobro Pole (15–21 September), and the Bulgarian front began rapidly to collapse. This was a favourable strategic turn for Italy, albeit not the one Diaz had envisaged. Austria would now have to shift forces

away from the Italian front to shore up her position in the Balkans, giving Italy her chance. Then, on 25 September, a memorandum landed on Diaz's desk laying out the strategic rationale for what would become the battle of Vittorio Veneto.

Arguing that the enemy must have noticed Italian preparations for a limited offensive on the Asiago plateau and that the ground was so difficult that an attack there could easily degenerate into a Carso-type offensive with no appreciable results, Colonel Cavallero suggested that what was needed instead was an operation combining 'brevity of preparation with the possibility of surprise'. An appropriate target did indeed exist: the single supply line for the Austrian 6th Army, which ran from Sacile via Vittorio and Val Mareno. Cut it and the entire 6th Army would fall into Italy's hands.¹²⁴ Cavallero's plan arrived at the moment when the complexion of the war suddenly changed. Franchet d'Espérey's victory in Macedonia split the German and Bulgarian armies apart and put the whole front in motion. Simultaneously, Allenby's success at the battle of Megiddo (19–21 September) signalled the end of Turkey as an active ally of the Central Powers. To watch Austria being attacked by Allied armies in the Balkans while the Italian army stood motionless on the Piave was to run a considerable political and military risk. Diaz approved the new idea at once, suspending the Asiago plan and keeping the decision for the time being to a very small circle of immediate subordinates. Foch was told and disapproved, thinking the new plan which was self-evidently not the mountain offensive he favoured risky and bound to fail. Orlando was kept in the dark.

The modified plan was accepted on 29 September and the proposed start date put back from 12 to 20 October to give 8th Army's artillery commander, General Ricci, time to get his guns in place.¹²⁵ That same day came news that Bulgaria had signed an armistice. As the planning cycle got under way, international politics added another complicating factor to the military equations. On 4 October Germany and Austria–Hungary asked Woodrow Wilson for an armistice based on the President's Fourteen Points. The cabinet meanwhile was at sixes and sevens over an offensive. At a ministerial meeting on 26 September, just as the big Allied attack on the western front was starting, Orlando argued against an Italian attack on the grounds that the enemy's position on the Grappa–Piave front was too strong and too well defended. Nitti, who did not expect the war to end quickly, stuck to what was by now his customary line: if the Allies sent troops then Italy should move, and if not not. On 20 October, with the battle four days away, Nitti, who was getting police reports from Turin about worker agitation and preparations for a strike, advised Orlando not to pressurize Diaz. 'A failure would be a disaster,' he warned the premier.

'The country would not survive it and we would face a revolt, if not a fully justified revolution.'¹²⁶ His pessimism continued to the last. On the eve of Vittorio Veneto he told Diaz that victory would change little but defeat would mean ruin, and four days after it began he wrote to Orlando (with whom he had by now entirely fallen out) deprecating the offensive, forecasting disaster and threatening to resign.¹²⁷

The battle plan that was meanwhile emerging covered a front from the Brenta river to the sea. The guiding intention was to separate the Austrians in the Trentino from the Austrians on the Piave and then envelope the mountain front and bring about its fall. The main thrust by Cavaglia's 8th Army, hitting the junction between the Austrian 6th and 5th Armies, would drive on Conegliano, Vittorio (not yet Vittorio Veneto) and Sacile, cutting the main enemy supply route. The advance would then swing north-west around the rear of Monte Grappa to take Feltre before driving up the Belluna valley to Cadore, the Val Cismon and Val Sugana.¹²⁸ When he saw it, Colonel Alberto Pariani, who was acting head of Cavaglia's secretariat, was not impressed by what he felt was far too casual a study: the artillery was too far back and logistic preparations were insufficient. On 11 October, after he had consulted with Cavaglia, 8th Army dropped Feltre as its second target (it went to 12th Army), and substituted Belluno.¹²⁹

The first operational directive, issued on 12 October, laid out the plan which now included supporting attacks by 4th and 3rd Armies at the north-western and southern ends of the front. The general intention was to hit the junction of the enemy's 6th and 5th Armies with maximum force in order to cut 6th Army's communications and pin it against the Piave, making retreat impossible, after which the army would exploit the possible consequences of the manoeuvre.¹³⁰ As the Italians hauled 4,750 guns into position along the front of the coming battle, international politics again speeded up the strategic clock. Evidently perturbed at the possible outcomes of President Woodrow Wilson's response on 8 October to a German note about possible armistice conditions, Orlando mused confusingly to his *generalissimo*. If an armistice were accepted an attack would not be worthwhile, but if it were not accepted then one would be. There were powerful reasons why the liberation of Italian territories should not follow a diplomatic act. The only way to reconcile these 'opposing and very delicate needs' was to make future Italian operations 'appear like the natural development of normal actions rather than a large scale offensive'. Diaz, who had just briefed his army commanders, was not disposed to postpone or abandon his planned attack, as Orlando seemed to be suggesting. 'I do not think that waiting on a possible future armistice which would be due to the Allied armies

and which may give us the possibility of securing the advantages we want without wearing ourselves out would be a desirable solution, and it would not at all correspond with our position and the size of our aspirations,' he told the premier.¹³¹ This war would end differently than the wars of 1859 and 1866.

As the staffs worked on the plan the details changed and its scope widened, necessitating the creation of two new armies. The orchestration of the battle split the front in two. On the left a new 12th Army, given to the French general Jean-César Graziani, would take the heights of Valdobbiadene and then drive on Feltre via the rear of Monte Grappa, while 4th Army waited on the outcome before it pushed a corps along the Val Brenta to Val Cismon. On the right, Cavaglia's 8th Army would drive on Vittorio and beyond, supported on its right by Cavan's newly created Anglo-Italian 10th Army which would cross the Piave at Grave di Papadopoli and advance on the Livenza river, covering Cavaglia's right flank. Behind the battle line Diaz formed a reserve – 9th Army – which included the Assault Corps and forty-eight batteries of motor-towed artillery.

Preparations for the attack were pressed ahead in appalling weather, and with the Piave rising fast Diaz issued a second operational directive on 18 October accepting that the planned action to cross it would have to be somewhat delayed. He now proposed an offensive on Monte Grappa 'as quickly as possible'. Giardino's 4th Army, initially tasked to await the outcome of the Piave battle, would launch an offensive there to fix the enemy's reserves in the Belluna basin behind it so that they could not be moved to the Piave.¹³² Three days later, he changed his mind again. The final directive, sent out on 21 October, altered the timing once more. Both attacks would now take place on the same day, the Monte Grappa attack in the morning and the attack on Vittorio in the afternoon. The exact date for both would be set by the *Comando supremo* according to the state of the river Piave and the weather.¹³³

As the *Comando supremo* finalised its plans, military intelligence provided growing reassurance that the odds were moving in Italy's favour. Diaz frequently attended the regular weekly meetings of the ITOs, as did Orlando, and he and his two sub-chiefs maintained close contact with them. Throughout the summer the intelligence service fed the army commander with information about the capabilities of the Austro-Hungarian army from a variety of sources that included agents landed behind the lines by the navy, former prisoners of war (especially Czechs) infiltrated by a special aviation group set up on 1 September, deserters, informers and press sources monitored by the Berne centre and others. In early June, evidence of mutinies in the Austro-Hungarian army came via the Swiss

press with a cautionary note attached: it was still possible that an enemy offensive might happen as the government had the means to suppress or limit any disturbances within the army and an ever-watchful Germany stood behind it.¹³⁴ In July there were signs that the enemy's army was growing more fragile. According to a Ruthenian deserter, whose evidence was confirmed by others, 'only soldiers of German nationality, [who are] still fanatics, still have any faith in the outcome of the war . . . all the other soldiers, including many Hungarians, see unavoidable catastrophe getting ever nearer'. The only nationalities still fighting with any conviction were the Germans and the Croats. Hungarians fighting on the Italian front were increasingly preoccupied with the spectacle of a Russian invasion of Hungary, something the Slavs devoutly hoped would happen.¹³⁵

In September the Austro-Hungarian pacifist offensive, which included leafleting and financing the fringe of the Italian socialist party in the hopes of stimulating a revolution, intensified but Italian counter-espionage and the close monitoring of troop morale by *Servizio P* gave the *Comando supremo* a reassurance that it had not had before Caporetto. For its part, Italy mounted a skilful and sophisticated propaganda offensive targeting the separate sub-nationalities, dropping tens of thousands of leaflets in which Germany was declared responsible for 'the spread of alcoholism [and] pornographic literature, corruption, [and] the destruction of family life', and Hungarian Magyars were told that they were tied to a corpse and that their only hope for salvation was total separation from Austria and the suppression of the Hungarian landowning elite. Whether all this effort had much effect remains somewhat doubtful.¹³⁶

As before Caporetto, there was contradictory intelligence about the possibility of an Austrian offensive in the Trentino – always an alarming prospect after 1916 – and the influx of German troops. Military intelligence concluded cautiously in September that offensive attempts by Austria 'to try to improve their own general situation' with or without German aid could not be ruled out. The Austrian army appeared still to be in good order though provisions were in very short supply. As more evidence about the enemy's internal political and economic situation became available the picture brightened. On 2 October, Diaz, Badoglio and Orlando were told at an ITO meeting that morale in the enemy army was starting to collapse. Although the line army was still strong, in colonel Marchetti's opinion it was 'like a pudding which has a crust of roasted almonds and is filled with cream'. The crust would be hard to break but if a hole was pierced in it and the cream – the reserves – was reached then it would melt away.¹³⁷ The collapse of Bulgaria and Turkey, and the arrival of Spanish flu, were likely to undermine the enemy's cohesion yet further.

Evidence that Italy faced an ever-weaker enemy now began to pile up. On 10 October military intelligence learnt that Austro-Hungarian officers did not think they could halt an Italian offensive. Two days later the next meeting of the ITO officers received an analysis by Colonel Marchetti showing that the march battalions of 18-year-olds were arriving at the enemy front with little or no combative spirit. On 17 October they learned that the Austrians knew that an Italian offensive was about to be launched in a few days and had reinforced their old line on the Isonzo in case of retreat. The enemy was indeed well aware that something was brewing. Austrian intercepts picked up urgent messages to the *Comando supremo* about the state of the water in the river Piave, and Austrian military intelligence was following the movement of Italian troops and the preparations being made for action.¹³⁸ However the Italians knew that the Austrian army, weakened by troop transfers to Bulgaria and Serbia, was in the grip of dysentery and cholera as well as Spanish flu. On 20 October news arrived of the first revolt of Hungarian troops in Val Sugana, and on the same day the Austrian press announced that the Skoda armaments works had stopped production two days earlier for want of coal.¹³⁹

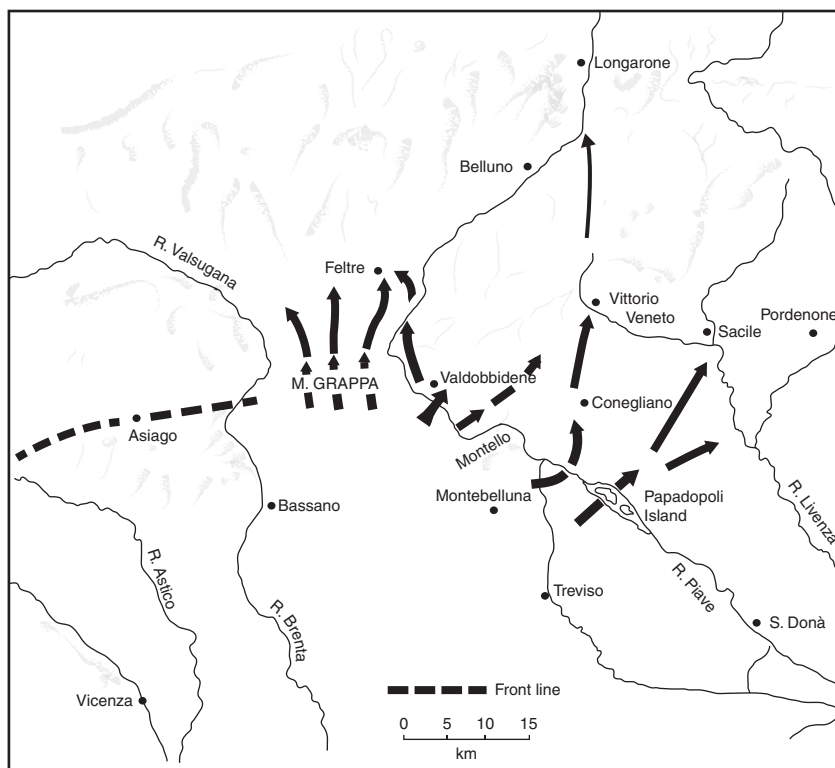
Logistical preparations for the battle were not helped by a complex and over-bureaucratised chain of command and poor co-ordination: the *Intendenza generale* only established a liaison office at the *Comando supremo* on 14 May 1918. The logistic service also lost 5 per cent of its manpower in July 1918 as a consequence of Diaz's comb-out of the rear areas. On 17 September 1918 the *Comando supremo* instructed army commands to 'prepare minds and organisations for a war of movement' and eleven days later the *Intendenza generale*, still thinking about an offensive in 1919, issued generalised instructions to the support services to study ways of improving communications, methods of transport and the movement of the wounded, given that railways would probably be unusable. Intendance officers in each army were left to identify and solve their own problems with whatever means they had available.¹⁴⁰ One improvement at least was now to hand – mechanised Weiss field ovens, which would mean that fresh bread would be available immediately to front-line troops.

The main task was to amass and distribute munitions, which the logistic services were able to do. However, on 20 October, four days before the battle started, the *Comando supremo* warned that the railways were experiencing 'a serious crisis which is hindering and slowing down military transport', exacerbated by the faster cycle of reusing rolling stock. Everyone was asked to reduce unloading times to a minimum. Measures were taken 'on the hoof' to support the offensive: when, during the battle, first 8th Army and then 4th Army signalled that they

were running out of flour and foodstuffs the *Comando supremo* gave priority to trains carrying rations. For the first week (24–30 October) the fact that the battle was taking place in a fairly restricted space helped resupply of the front line, but even so continuous interruption of the bridges over the Piave as a result of the combined effects of flooding and enemy gunfire produced a logistical crisis. Limited but effective use of air supply helped overcome it. Thereafter the intendants services had to supply not only fast-moving columns but also large numbers of prisoners of war and the civil inhabitants of the formerly occupied territories. The last days have been seen by the leading historian of logistics not as a true war of movement but as a steady follow-up by an army that did not want to be burdened with lots of Austrian prisoners.¹⁴¹

Despite calling up the 1900 class in March 1918, Diaz was barely able to make up the losses suffered at Caporetto and afterwards (between June and November the army lost 2,000 men a day, mainly to Spanish flu and malaria), so that for the battle of Vittorio Veneto he had at his disposal a field army that was slightly smaller than it had been a year before. Abandoning Cadorna's offensives had reduced casualties: during the eleven months of combat in 1918 168,903 men were killed and wounded (and another 111,613 died from illness), whereas between May and November 1917 killed and wounded amounted to 461,000. To maximise front-line manpower, headquarters staffs at corps level and above were reduced by a quarter, support services above brigade level lost 5 per cent of their numbers and rear echelons were swept of anyone fit for front-line service, yielding another 150,000 men.¹⁴² At the start of October 1918, Diaz's army numbered 79,000 officers (5,000 more than before Caporetto), 2,092,000 other ranks (about the same number) and 312,000 horses (62,000 fewer), together with 2,500 motor cars and 28,000 trucks, motor ambulances and buses. Far from enjoying the three-to-one superiority held to be necessary for a successful attack, he was one division weaker than his opponent.

The weather determined the final decision. The Piave was too high to get across and so on 24 October Giardino's army began the attack on Monte Grappa. Over the next five days vicious fighting cost the Italians 5,000 dead, 20,000 wounded and 3,000 prisoners of war with little ground gained – confirming the Italians' belief that whatever might be happening back in the Empire, Austria–Hungary's front-line troops were still in fighting shape. After two days the flooded river began to go down and during the night of 26/27 October Cavaglia's men began to cross. The task of breaking into the Austrian defences fell to the two *Arditi* divisions of Grazioli's *Corpo d'Armata d'Assalto*. Zoppi's orders to his 1st Assault Division were to get on with the job in hand and fight in the way



6. Vittorio Veneto

they were accustomed to fight: ‘No elaborate manoeuvres . . . simplicity and irresistibility . . . Of one hundred who set out ten will arrive, but these ten will resolve the situation.’¹⁴³ Success for the lightly armed *Arditi* turned on accurate preparation and surprise, neither of which was possible: Zoppi’s men only received their orders on 22 October, two days before the battle was due to start. Instead they were going to have to rely on brute force, speed and sheer determination.

Some of Zoppi’s men got across the Piave late in the evening of 26 October, but the rest were held up by a combination of high water and Austrian machine-guns. The intention was to link up with Major-General Ernesto De Marchi’s 2nd Assault Division crossing a little lower down at Ponte di Priula and drive north and east, but a combination of Austrian artillery and Italian river water delayed De Marchi’s crossing for three days. The plan was starting to go awry. A strenuous Austrian

counter-attack pushed Zoppi's *Arditi* back and Austrian guns smashed the bridges behind them. For two days they clung on, resupplied by boats and by aircraft dropping boxes of ammunition while new bridges were built at night, enabling Caviglia's VIII Corps for whom they were supposed to be breaking and entering the Austrian lines to cross behind them. By that time XXVIII Corps had two regiments across on the left, XXII Corps was across in the centre but all the bridges behind it had been destroyed, and on the right a combination of machine-gun and artillery fire and a rising river meant VIII Corps could not get across at all. To unlock the door, Caviglia ordered XVIII Corps to get across at Grave di Papadopoli and open the way for his right hand corps.

The British XIV corps had been assigned the task of seizing the island of Grave di Papadopoli and then leapfrogging to the left bank of the Piave. The river at this point was some 2.5 kilometres wide and after heavy rain that began on 14 October the current was running at 16 kilometres an hour. Cavan asked for artillery to support seizing the island twenty-four or twenty-eight hours ahead of the main attack but Caviglia refused on the grounds that this would simply focus Austrian attention and firepower on the attempt. During the night of 23/24 October elements of the British 7th division established a foothold on the top end of the island, while Italian units simultaneously occupied the island of Caserta next to the bottom end. Next day neither could get any further thanks chiefly to heavy rain which made resupply and reinforcement well-nigh impossible. Everything came to a halt that evening when the *Comando supremo* ordered a temporary delay in the main offensive. Over the next two days the troops fought off enemy counter-attacks and took possession of the island while the engineers built bridges and coped with currents twice as fast as they had expected.¹⁴⁴

The Piave was bridged on 26 October, and with that leverage in his hands, Diaz ordered 10th, 8th and 12th Armies to attack next morning. Over three days 4th and 10th Armies fought bitter battles for Monte Grappa and the *altipiani*, costing them a total during the entire battle of 5,000 dead and 19,000 wounded. In the meantime General Lord Cavan's troops completed their crossing of the Piave and began to push forward, even though neither 3rd Army flanking it on the right nor 8th Army on the left were yet in evidence. By the end of the day Caviglia's 8th Army had put a division across the Piave at Sernaglia, but the two bridgeheads were 10 kilometres apart. French troops of Graziani's 12th Army forced their way across the Piave at Pederobba on 27 October against Austrian artillery fire that repeatedly hit the bridges. Over the next three days, against gradually weakening opposition, French and Italian troops forced their way onto the heights of Valdobbiadene and

pushed on to Feltre in support of 4th Army, which was meeting strong resistance on Monte Grappa. Given another corps by Cavaglia, Cavan pushed up the east bank of the Piave, forcing the Austrians to fall back and thereby allowing 8th Army to build the bridges it needed to cross the Piave at Ponte di Priula. Cavaglia's troops crossed the river early on 29 October to link up with the Sernaglia bridgehead.

On the morning of 28 October Italian military intelligence intercepted a message from Count Julius Andrassy to Robert Lansing, American secretary of state, announcing that Austria–Hungary was ready to agree a negotiated peace and accepted American conditions for negotiating an armistice.¹⁴⁵ Seeing a potential threat to Italy's bargaining position at the upcoming peace negotiations – already somewhat weakened by her earlier inaction – Orlando asked Diaz to antedate the offensive to 24 October. Diaz tartly reminded the premier that he knew the dates of the preparations, that the taking of Grave di Papadopoli was the first act of the battle, that it had been reported in the official communiqué that day (24 October) as a *colpo di mano* solely in order not to call the enemy's attention to it, and that subsequent action had been delayed by bad weather. There was more than enough evidence to back up the facts. Foch had been told of the plans on 10 October, the French liaison officer Colonel Parisot had been briefed during his visit between 26 September and 17 October, and the French General Graziani had been briefed on 10 October.¹⁴⁶ Orlando's telegram, suggesting that the battle of Vittorio Veneto was an extemporisation spatchcocked together to look better than it was, did Italy no favours and started an historical hare that has been running ever since.

On 29 October – the decisive day of the campaign in Austrian eyes – the emperor met with his ministers and concluded that the struggle could not be continued any longer. That night Boroević, whose armies were already in retreat, was ordered to evacuate the area under his command. The combined advance that began that day, exploiting the Austrian retreat, had been made possible by 10th Army's achievements lower down the river. Altogether, the fighting on and across the Piave between 24 and 30 October had cost the Italians 9,500 dead and 20,000 wounded. Rapid movement now became the order of the day as 8th Army drove on Monticano, which it took after hard fighting next day. The Italian armies pursued the retreating Austrians as fast as possible in order to deny them any time in which to organise defences in the narrow Piave valley. On 30 October 1st Assault Division was withdrawn from the battle, embittered at not being allowed a triumphal entry into Vittorio Veneto. The varied experiences of the two *Arditi* divisions were reflected in their battle statistics: 1st Assault Division, some 8,700 strong, suffered

1,172 casualties and took 3,500 prisoners, while 2nd Assault Division took 4,500 prisoners at a cost of only 166 casualties.¹⁴⁷ Vittorio Veneto fell on 30 October to a light force of cavalry and *Bersaglieri* cyclists. 'What's happening is a Caporetto in reverse,' a jubilant Diaz told his wife, 'because now it's a matter of putting the whole enemy army out of action.'¹⁴⁸

Pursuing the retreating enemy, the British took Sacile on 31 October and closed up to the Livenza river, crossing it next day. In the meantime, with the Austrian centre collapsing, troops of the 8th, 12th and 4th Armies raced towards Feltre and Belluno. On 4 November, the last day of the war, British troops splashed across the Tagliamento. Their role in victory had been of great importance, as the duke of Aosta afterwards acknowledged. 'Without the presence of you and your troops,' he told Cavan, bidding him farewell in January 1919, 'there would have been no Vittorio Veneto.'¹⁴⁹

Air superiority played an important role in the victory at Vittorio Veneto. Between 25 and 31 October some 650–700 Italian, British and French aircraft faced at least 478 enemy aircraft. They flew a total of 2,533 missions at an average rate of 700 flights a day, shooting down 32 enemy fighters and 11 balloons, dropping 200 tons of bombs, and firing over 300,000 rounds of machine-gun ammunition at enemy troops. Copying a formation they had observed in France in 1916, and had first used at the battle of the Solstice in June, the Italians united 120 aircraft in a mass fighter formation to create a barrier against incursions by enemy planes. Aerial and photographic reconnaissance and artillery spotting were force multipliers for Italian arms. Aircraft dropped food and munitions to troops cut off on the islands at Grave di Papadopoli, as well as deluging the enemy with hundreds of thousands of leaflets.¹⁵⁰

The two sides had been fairly evenly matched at the start of the battle, 57½ Italian and Allied divisions with 7,700 guns and 1,750 bombards facing 58½ Austrian divisions with 6,000 guns and 1,000 bombards. The guns had played an important part in what was, for the first six days, a battle of attrition: between 24 and 31 October the Italian artillery fired 2,446,000 rounds, half the total available stock and the equivalent of one month's war production. The logistical effort required to fight the battle was commensurate. Moving the troops consumed 9,240 tons of petrol, the equivalent of 637 tons a day, requiring 3,500 wagons. Simply moving the bridging materials took another 3,500 railway wagons. The battle cost the Italians some 37,000 casualties of which perhaps as many as two-thirds were suffered by 4th Army on and around Monte Grappa. Vittorio Veneto was certainly not, as some foreign historians have hinted, a *passeggiata* (promenade). However, once its front line had cracked open

the Austrian army rapidly dissolved as starving troops clung to the roofs and doors of trains in a desperate effort to get home. On the morrow of the armistice the Brenner railway line was so thick with the corpses of those who had fallen off that the local authorities had to close it.¹⁵¹

Armistice

The first steps towards a cessation of hostilities were taken by both sides in the weeks immediately preceding the start of the battle of Vittorio Veneto. On 4 October the Austrians established a commission at Trento to look into possible armistice conditions. At that moment they were contemplating nothing more punishing than a ceasefire in place. On 13 October, Orlando asked Diaz for ideas about a future armistice. An armistice line was approved next day and Colonel Pariani, who had been seconded to headquarters staff as one of the group working on the armistice, was sent off with it to Versailles. On his return to Rome ten days later he discussed the terms of an armistice with the war minister. Zupelli was inclined not to insist on the Tyrol but believed that for political reasons Trieste and Istria were 'indispensable'. Next day Pariani explained to Orlando, Sonnino and senior naval representatives the *Comando supremo's* rationale for believing that the only properly defensible border ran along the mountain watershed and down to the Gulf of Quarnero east of Valona. On 27 October Diaz's staff settled the line of occupation to be held once Austria capitulated: it ran from Innsbruck via Villach and Ljubljana to Fiume – the latter added by Pariani.¹⁵²

Once the battle had begun events moved quickly. On 28 October, General Viktor Weber was ordered to reassemble the armistice commission and make contact with the Italian supreme command, and on the same day Borojević signalled that he could no longer rely on even his most disciplined units to stand fast. Later that night the Austrian armies were given orders to withdraw. Next day Vienna indicated that it wanted to move to an armistice and the first Austrian plenipotentiaries turned up at the Italian lines. General Weber arrived to lead the delegation on 30 October, but was not allowed across the line until the *Comando supremo* had given its express agreement at 2030 that evening.

When discussions began in Paris on the armistice terms for Germany and Austria–Hungary on 29 October, Austria–Hungary had already agreed to complete independence for the Czechs and Yugoslavs, and President Wilson had made it clear that she must clear out of all occupied Italian territory. Next day Orlando advised his fellow statesmen that Weber had arrived with authorisation to treat for an armistice on the basis of Wilson's Fourteen Points, though Diaz did not consider him

yet fully accredited to do so. He also relayed the content of an intercepted radio message from Emperor Karl requesting an immediate suspension of hostilities on the grounds that a fighting evacuation of the plains would damage the region. Lloyd George leaped at the chance to conclude an armistice with Austria–Hungary before negotiating with Germany, and the assembled diplomats put together a list of terms. It included the demobilisation of a number of enemy divisions, occupation of the line embodied in the Treaty of London, the free movement of Allied troops by road, rail or water, the occupation of key strategic points, and the release of all prisoners of war and allied internees. ‘Aren’t you going to ask for the Emperor’s britches?’, Clemenceau reportedly exclaimed when the list finally came to an end.¹⁵³

The Austrian delegation arrived at Villa Giusti, near Padua, early in the evening of 31 October. Motoring there, they thought they had landed in another world: ‘The men we see are rosy-cheeked with happy faces; they eat the whitest of bread and sing joyfully. Their equipment is best quality, the horses are fat and well-nourished. Automobiles, motorcycles and guns drawn by motors go to and fro in great numbers, meeting one another every ten yards.’¹⁵⁴ A German delegate sent by Hindenburg attempted to join in but was sent away. Diaz was happy with the terms set that day at Versailles. ‘If they accept our conditions, which amount to a true surrender,’ he told his wife, ‘we can move against Germany through Austria, if the Germans don’t give up. If they don’t accept then we’ll carry on and it will be a disaster for the Austrian army, after which we’ll move against Germany wherever it resists.’¹⁵⁵

Diaz’s staff had in fact begun planning for follow-on operations against southern Bavaria, and it was at his express request that the armistice conditions included the right of free Allied movement across Austria. The planners estimated that using four railway lines twenty divisions could be moved by rail to Lindau and Kufstein and another twenty to twenty-five divisions to Salzburg within three weeks. The major problem was the decayed state of the railways on the Venetian plain, which would take two months to repair. Foch simultaneously unveiled his plan for a dual attack on southern Bavaria, using twenty to twenty-five Italian and Allied divisions, and on Saxony using Czech troops. Although concerned about the mounting pressure from Yugoslavia which the army had to face, Diaz telegraphed Orlando on the day that the armistice came into force telling him that the army was readying itself to cross Austria and act against Germany. The German armistice meant that the plan never had to be put into effect. This was probably fortunate because to carry out the troop movements Italy would have needed from her allies 650 railway engines, 15,000 railway wagons, 85,000 trucks and various

other vehicles besides, as well as 2,500 tons of coal and 700 tons of petrol a day. The plan was finally discarded in mid December 1918 and the units scheduled to carry it out were demobilised.¹⁵⁶

At 1000 on 1 November General Badoglio arrived to head the Italian armistice commission with Colonel Pietro Gazzera and Colonel Pariani in tow. In discussion with Badoglio that afternoon Weber, anxious to hasten the moment when the fighting stopped, wanted an immediate cessation of hostilities. Badoglio was immovable – there could be no ceasefire until the armistice was concluded. Pariani, who was unhappy with what had come back from Paris about the surrender of arms and matériel, and who thought the armistice line too vaguely defined, suggested an ‘additional protocol’.¹⁵⁷ The Austro-Hungarian high command was momentarily overwhelmed by the severity of the conditions and for a while seemed undecided whether to agree to them or not. Next day, Diaz was instructed to give them forty-eight hours to decide. The original French text arrived at Villa Giusti early that afternoon, along with further instructions that the last moment for their acceptance was midnight on 3/4 November.

Weber wanted to go on with the war, but the Hungarian war minister had sent out orders to all Magyar units on 31 October to lay down their arms. Talks went on long into the night as the Austrian delegation tried to alter the condition that twenty-four hours must elapse after the signing of the armistice before it came into effect – a requirement that was not part of the terms devised at Versailles but something Badoglio held was indispensable if the necessary orders were to get through to Italian troops who were advancing everywhere at full speed.¹⁵⁸ More likely, Badoglio had at the front of his mind the stipulation that the front line in Italy had been defined as that reached by the most advanced Italian and Allied units at the moment that the armistice went into effect. The document, with the protocol appended to it, was finally signed at 1520 that afternoon.

According to the agreement, hostilities were to cease at 1500 hours on 4 November. A brief interlude of complete confusion followed, for which responsibility seems chiefly to lie with the Austrian high command and in particular the chief of staff, General Arz von Straussenburg, who announced at 0200 that same day that armistice terms had been accepted and that all hostilities were to cease immediately. Fifteen minutes later another message annulled the ceasefire order, whereupon the Austrian army commanders protested that the first order had already been distributed and they could not now go back on it. A subsequent message went out to all units that hostilities would cease at 1600 the same day. Different Austrian units were given different times when fighting was to

stop. Italian units went on with the war for another twenty-four hours, while their enemies believed that it was over at last. In some places commanders behaved prudently, not risking lives unnecessarily, but in others men died obeying the order to keep the war going for one more day. Austrian units that had maintained their cohesion and kept their weapons passed through the Italians and made it home. Most of them did not: an estimated 300,000 prisoners were taken in the last twenty-four hours.¹⁵⁹ Finally, on 4 November, the guns fell silent. In Padua thousands of jubilant inhabitants mobbed the king's car and many tried to kiss his hands in what was doubtless as much an expression of exhausted relief as it was of patriotic enthusiasm.

Having won her war, Italy now plunged into the complex waters of peacemaking at Versailles. Expectations were high on all sides: diplomats looked for gains that had been unattainable in the continuum of peace that had preceded the conflict; the military, habituated for the first time to being an equal and independent partner in the business of state, cast its net wide as it sought for security in a post-war world; and the toiling masses now sought their reward for years of hardship and loss. Forces that had been roiling just below the surface of Italian politics and society for three and a half years were about to spill out into the open.